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Rebuild World II
Part One
Users of the Old Domain

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The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.

But every wish has a price, even if the person making it is none the wiser.

Rebuild World II

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Users of the Old Domain

Part One

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>Episode 002

Part One Users of the Old Domain

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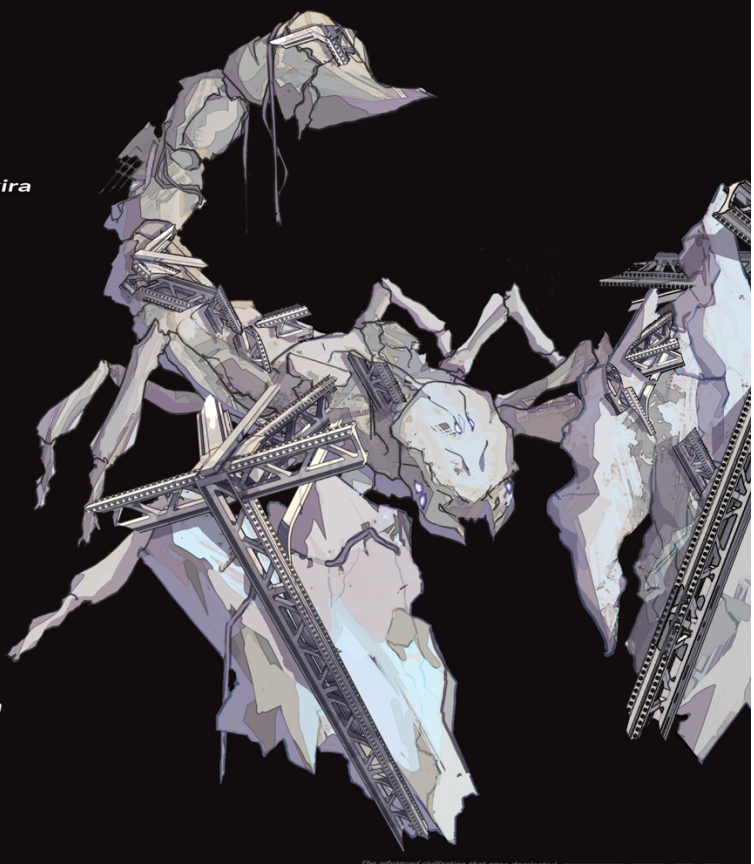

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Rebuild World RVII

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Chapter 31: Reconnaissance

A boy from the slums set out to become a relic hunter, to claw his way up out of the back alleys. Then, in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, he found a new goal: he met a mysterious beauty and accepted her request to conquer a certain ruin of the Old World. But that job was currently beyond his ability. So he strove to grow stronger—to gear up, train relentlessly, and survive battle after deadly battle—all so he could see his task through to the end.

Now he was a full-fledged hunter, this child who had once left the slums with only the dingy clothes on his back and a pistol in his hand. Today he wore a powered suit, carried massive anti-monster rifles, and rode a desert motorcycle.

But the road to his ultimate destination still stretched far into the distance. He would need even greater power if he hoped to complete this first job he'd taken as a hunter and live the life he'd once dreamed of when he hid out in the back alleys. And so, he kept hunting, side by side with the enigmatic woman only he could see.

His name was Akira; hers, Alpha. Their career was only just beginning.

◆

Akira sped across the wasteland. His motorcycle automatically scouted for nearby enemies, thanks to the sensors he'd rented from the Hunter Office. It also recorded his route, scanning radius, and the numbers and species of monsters he encountered or killed. This data would determine how much he got paid for his current job—minus the rental fee and the cost of any repairs.

He was running this patrol solo, not bound for any particular destination. Working alone offered much greater liberty than joining one of the city-sponsored patrol trucks, as he had been doing recently. He could patrol wherever and whenever he chose. But the price of freedom was total personal responsibility, without even the modicum of safety that came from

the municipal officials divvying up patrol areas to hunters according to their skill level. He could have brought a team along, but then he would be answerable for his companions' well-being too. And because he wasn't riding on a municipal truck, there was no official to curb his wilder instincts.

So he had to figure out how to strike the right balance between risk and reward. Patrolling danger zones swarming with powerful monsters would earn him extra pay, but a mistake could leave him facing a monster swarm on his own. If he kept to safe areas and just killed time, however, the equipment rental fee would leave him in the red. No one else was around to stop him if he cut and ran, or to get in his way if he got greedy and stuck it out—everything hinged on his decisions alone.

As a result, working alone came with far greater advantages and disadvantages than joining a patrol group. Akira did have Alpha to help him, and her support tipped the scales in his favor, but patrolling the wasteland on foot was still out of the question. With the motorcycle he'd earned for his last job, however, he could now make the most of his advantage.

If he spoke to Alpha out loud, the rented instruments would have recorded it as an interminable monologue. So as he worked, he talked to her telepathically instead.

I was worried about running into a whole pack of monsters, but we haven't seen a single one. Kind of a letdown, honestly, he remarked. He felt bemused. After his recent experiences, he had half expected any journey through the wasteland to land him in the path of a ravening horde.

After the slaughter in that battle the other day, it's a wonder there are any left, she replied cheerfully.

I guess you're right.

But don't worry that overhunting will leave you short of prey. The monster population will recover in no time, and then you'll run into them as often as before, Alpha added, smiling.

Akira gave a grin that was less than enthusiastic. *Glad to hear I'll always have something to hunt as long as I'm strong enough to bring it down. Does that mean it'll be peaceful around here for a little while?* He paused, looking pensive for the first time in the conversation. *Now that I think about it, where do all these monsters come from? I mean, hunters cull*

them periodically, but they still bounce back so fast we never run out of targets. It doesn't add up.

Some ruin—either undiscovered or too well guarded to take over—must have a fabricator that's pumping them out nonstop, Alpha said. *As for whether they're made locally or drifting to this region from somewhere else, your guess is as good as mine.*

Well, that explains the robots, anyway.

And the animals too.

Akira started. *Living monsters come from factories?* he asked. *They don't breed?*

That's right. I mean, it's not always easy to draw a hard line between manufacture and reproduction, but they're definitely mass-produced.

With that, Alpha smugly launched into a detailed explanation, as much to show off her knowledge as to answer his question. Although all entities hostile to humans were currently labeled "monsters," she explained, not all were harmful by design. Even beasts created as living weapons had originally been engineered to perform specific functions—indiscriminate killers were no use to anyone. And whatever a creature's purpose—livestock, pet, guard animal, or bioweapon—its forgotten creators had usually controlled its gestation all the way down to the level of cell division. To maintain high standards of quality, Old World engineers had eliminated the randomness of natural mating.

They had even created machines with the power of self-replication—robots that were born rather than built. Given the necessary materials, such creatures multiplied like animals—but without accidental mutations. So these machines ended up with identical specifications, like goods off a production line, as long as there was someone to monitor them.

While the Old World factories stood, they would continue churning out their products—be they animal, robot, or something in between. And even destroying a factory would do nothing to halt the monsters it had already released. Some beasts also went feral and reproduced in the wasteland, growing ever more deadly in order to adapt to their harsh environment. Machine learning allowed robots to do likewise, deriving self-replication from self-repair.

The monster problem would threaten human territory if left unchecked, but it defied a permanent solution. And so, the ELGC did the next best thing

—they sent hunters to exterminate hostile creatures and to explore and conquer the Old World ruins that produced them. Even Akira's solo patrol job was part of the League's far-reaching countermeasures.

No wonder there are always monsters around, Akira said, unsure whether he was more annoyed or impressed by the Old World after what he'd just heard. *They're made with the same ancient tech I keep hearing so much about, so of course they defy common sense.*

But you've still taken down plenty of them, Alpha pointed out, hoping to raise his spirits. With a knowing grin, she added pointedly, *I wonder who you have to thank for that.*

I know, and I'm grateful. Akira chuckled.

Then show it by killing that thing without any help from me. Alpha pointed to a lone monster in the desert. *This will double as a test of your current abilities.*

On it.

The beast was a long way off, but Akira picked it out and drove straight for it. Once he had gotten a good look at his target, he stopped his motorcycle and dismounted, raising the output of his powered suit as he lifted his CWH anti-materiel rifle.

The large predator was full of the tenacious vitality needed to live in that harsh terrain. Its muscles bulged as its four powerful legs pounded the earth, propelling it across the wasteland at a speed that belied its bulk. Its thick fur, harder than most metals, could deflect bullets from the pistols so common in the slums—the beast wouldn't so much as flinch. Even an AAH assault rifle would require sustained fire to bring it down.

But Akira had a CWH, more than powerful enough to kill the beast in a single shot—if he hit it. With Alpha's support, he wouldn't even have needed to stop. An ultra-precise shot as he sat atop his moving bike would have done the trick. But that wouldn't be his own skill, and he knew it. So he dismounted and held his weapon steady.

Without his powered suit, he would have struggled even to lift the CWH. Thanks to the suit, he could raise and aim it, but he still lacked experience with both suit and gun. Centering the behemoth in his sights proved a challenge. Nevertheless, he did the best he could and pulled the trigger. His weapon roared, and a generic armor-piercing bullet tore through the air toward his target.

But Akira's best wasn't good enough. His shot passed harmlessly by the beast, leaving it unfazed.

Disappointed, he took a deep breath, steeled himself, and trained his sights on the monster again. Gripping the rifle in both hands, he planted his feet firmly on the ground and braced himself to minimize the recoil. He grimly aimed and fired again. His second bullet also went wide—nearer the mark, but still not even grazing it. Another disappointment.

But moping would get him nowhere, he told himself as he steadied his breathing yet again. When he raised the rifle and stared down the sights this time, a blue line appeared, displaying his bullet's predicted trajectory—Alpha's support.

Didn't she want him to do this without her help? He glanced in Alpha's direction. Her smile told him he wasn't ready to take out this monster all on his own yet. With the faintest of grimaces, he returned his attention to his target.

Akira had targeting assistance now, but his suit was still under his control, not Alpha's. He strove to remain calm as he trained the blue line on a point between the creature's eyes. His target was running toward him, its head lurching in all directions. He used his suit to stabilize his weapon, steadying the faintly wavering line as he took aim, focused, and waited. The moment his enemy's head connected with the blue line, he squeezed the trigger.

The armor-piercing bullet sped through the air, its trajectory matching Alpha's prediction almost perfectly. This time, he shot true. Fragments of the beast's tough hide went flying, torn off by the projectile, but it didn't bleed. He had only grazed it.

Close, but no cigar, Alpha chimed in.

Not even when I can see the trajectory, huh? Akira sighed. *Looks like it'll be a long time before I can land a shot like that on my own.*

You're also firing from fairly long range because it keeps you safer and makes for better training. Now focus—your target's closing in.

Okay. Next shot.

Akira's third bullet hadn't frightened the monster off. The enraged brute continued its charge, faster and faster, radiating hatred and ravenous hunger. Akira watched it through his rifle sights and fired again and again, just as he had countless times against Alpha's virtual targets. But this enemy was flesh

and blood, and unless he finished it off first, his corpse would lie on the desert ground for real this time.

Like a voice growing louder in his ear, his mounting fear became more insistent and urgent with every missed shot. *Jump on your bike and drive off*, it said. *Or ask Alpha for more support*. But Akira held firm and smothered its cries. Calm and focused, he kept firing grimly.

Then—*blam!*—he scored a clean hit at last.

The armor-piercing bullet could punch holes in machines' metal plating. It tore through the beast's steellike coat, shredding the muscles that supported the creature's bulk and smashing bones and organs as it carved a tunnel through the brute's body and shot out the other side. Even that grievous wound wasn't enough to kill the freakishly tough monster, but it slowed down. And as far as Akira was concerned, a slow monster was just a target.

He calmly, painstakingly aimed at his enemy's head and fired again. This time, his bullet demolished its skull and scrambled the brain within, killing it instantly.

The monster had gotten closer to Akira than he would have liked, but all was well that ended well. Having confirmed the kill through his sights, he relaxed, lowered his rifle, and let out a long breath.

You did it! Alpha cheered. *Not too shabby.*

Yeah? Akira responded distantly, a slight frown on his face. He felt that Alpha's praise was sincere, but he also knew he couldn't have killed the beast without her help. So his joy was not unalloyed.

Well, ammo costs shouldn't put us in the red, anyway. Right? he asked, trying to distract himself.

Probably not, Alpha agreed.

Good. Akira nodded and grinned to boost his own morale. For the moment, he told himself, he was doing well as long as he stayed in the black.

Akira was back on his patrol route, making small talk with Alpha, when a thought struck him.

Hey, remember how you said we'd be running patrols until I got my hunter rank high enough? he asked. *How high are we aiming for, exactly? It went up to seventeen after that emergency job.*

Around twenty should do, I think, Alpha replied.

Twenty, huh? What do I need it that high for?

Because then you can rent desert vehicles on much better terms.

Vehicles designed for the wasteland, Alpha went on, naturally boasted higher performance—and steeper price tags—than ordinary cars. Rental shops couldn't turn a profit if rookie hunters kept driving off in their most expensive vehicles, never to be seen again, and insurance could only cover so much. So most businesses scaled their fees with hunter rank. Proven veterans paid less for rentals, while rank ten hunters might find it cheaper to buy a car outright. At rank twenty, a hunter could begin renting fairly impressive desert vehicles, with insurance, and still end up in the black.

But do I really need to rent a car? Akira asked. *I mean, I've got my motorbike, and it'd be pricey either way. Couldn't I just ride to other ruins on this?*

No. Alpha shut him down. *Your motorcycle doesn't have much storage space for ammo. You'll need to buy or rent a car, and cars built for the wasteland don't come cheap, so you'll have to rent for the foreseeable future. A car is also a better choice for hauling relics back from the ruins.*

Makes sense, I guess. Still, could we swing by some ruin on my bike in the meantime? This thing can carry small relics like medicine.

No, not until you're fully equipped for it. That means a car and, ideally, scanners. Other ruins can wait until you have those.

I dunno... Won't that take a while? Akira's curiosity about relic hunting beyond the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, not to mention his dwindling supply of medicine, made him unusually persistent.

Alpha gave him a smile he knew all too well. Seeing that look dimmed his enthusiasm, and her next words snuffed it out completely.

As I believe I've mentioned before, my scouting abilities are most effective in Kuzusuhara Town. I won't be able to detect threats with nearly the same precision in any other ruin.

Akira grimaced as he pictured what that drop in performance could lead to.

Scanners will do a lot to make up for my reduced capabilities, Alpha continued. *Do you still want to visit other ruins with your current gear? If you insist, I won't stop you, of course. If you* really *want to, let's go! Right now!*

Got it. Scratch that plan, Akira said quickly. He knew that at his current skill level, entering a ruin without Alpha's guidance would be suicidal. Getting ambushed from all sides wasn't his idea of fun. *So I've gotta buy scanners* and *a car? And the CWH wasn't cheap either. That twelve million aurum I made is sure going fast.*

That's hunting for you. Look at it this way: if working a ruin costs you more than you earn, then you're not ready for it.

Akira considered. *I guess you're right.*

There was no shortage of overconfident hunters who lost their lives in ruins beyond their ability. If Akira hadn't met Alpha, he would have been one of them. Their encounter had been a strange twist of fate, and without it he wouldn't be alive. He grinned wryly at the thought.

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Akira went on working patrol jobs, taking days off to recuperate in between his trips to the wasteland. One such rest day found him visiting Cartridge Freak to resupply on ammunition. Elena and Sara were already there, chatting with Shizuka, so he joined them after placing his order. The conversation turned to powered suits, and Akira was startled to learn that Elena didn't use one.

"You mean you've only been wearing body armor?" he asked artlessly. "You must be a lot stronger than you look, then. All those scanners I saw you carrying seemed heavy."

He had naturally assumed she wore a powered suit, given the sturdy straps she wore to support her various instruments. Her gear, he felt sure, weighed enough to crush him without one.

"That's right, and she still calls herself delicate." Sara laughed, amused at Akira's reaction. "Kind of a tough sell, don't you think?"

"Well, I, er..." Akira wavered, unsure whether it was safe to agree.

"I don't want to hear that from someone who swings around an A4WM grenade launcher one-handed," Elena retorted, miffed. "Do you have any idea how much that thing weighs fully loaded?"

"What do you expect?" Sara responded. "I've got nanomachine augments. I'd be plenty delicate without them."

"And that chest you're so proud of would go back to being flat."

The partners smiled menacingly at each other. Akira flinched, even though their ire wasn't directed at him. Shizuka, happily watching the sparks fly, noticed his unease and intervened.

"That's enough, you two," she said, grinning ruefully. "You're scaring Akira. This isn't the place to show off what intimidating hunters you are, unless you want him to steer clear of you."

The pair dropped their teasing and turned to Akira, who found the attention disconcerting.

"Oh, well, I don't know about 'delicate,' but I do think you're slim and pretty, Elena," he said, struggling to piece together a pleasing intercession from his meager vocabulary.

Elena, an experienced negotiator, immediately recognized his attempt to smooth things over for what it was. But she also sensed his sincerity, and that put her in a good mood.

"What about me?" Sara asked, staring straight at Akira with a smile that plainly demanded a response.

"I think you're very pretty too, Sara," he answered hurriedly, much to her delight.

"And me?" Shizuka joined in, half-joking. She'd gotten a kick out of watching her friends' reactions.

"You're pretty too, Shizuka," Akira said. He could tell that she wasn't being serious, but he still felt a little embarrassed answering her, and it showed.

What about me, Akira? Alpha chimed in.

Akira never wanted to look like a weirdo who talked to empty space, but he made a special effort to avoid it around Shizuka. So, when Alpha interrupted their conversation, he got annoyed and spoke more coldly than usual.

You look great. That good enough?

Why are you always so sharp with me? she demanded, annoyed at his slapdash response.

Because I know for sure you're just messing with me. I'm trying not to glance at you without meaning to, so don't make it any harder for me.

Shizuka, meanwhile, was startled to find that Akira's compliment pleased her more than she'd expected—so startled that she missed the slight shift in his gaze.

“Is calling people ‘pretty’ your go-to for smoothing things over?” she teased, grinning to mask her thoughts.

“No, but I don’t know how to come up with anything clever,” he said. “And even if it’s not that creative, it’s still true.”

“I...I see.”

Each woman noticed the blushes on the others’ cheeks and realized she probably looked the same. As they were unsure what to say without calling attention to their discomfort, an awkward silence fell.

Akira also felt the embarrassment in the room, and tried to change the subject. “Come to think of it, you don’t wear a powered suit either, Sara,” he said.

“Me?” Sara responded. “I’m augmented, so most run-of-the-mill suits would actually make me weaker. Plus, I’d have to worry about nanomachine compatibility when I chose one.”

“Oh, that sounds rough.”

“There are suits that get around all those problems, but they’re a bit out of my price range,” she added. “Body armor that boosts nanomachine efficiency will be a better fit for me until I’ve got more funds.”

“Nothing’s ever easy, is it? So, Elena, what kind of suit did you buy?”

Akira was just trying to keep the conversation on safe ground now that they had put that awkward pause behind them. Elena, however, grew flustered.

“Huh? W-Well, it’s pretty high spec. I got Shizuka to pick it for me, just like you did.”

“Really?” Akira probed deeper. “High-end suits must look pretty different from mine, right? What’s it like?”

“Oh, I’m not sure how to describe it,” Elena said evasively, trying not to meet his gaze.

Akira looked mystified. He hadn’t meant to bring up any touchy subjects.

“Since you’re having trouble putting it into words, you might as well show him,” Shizuka cut in, grinning triumphantly. “It will be here sometime next week, so be patient until then.”

“H-Hang on!” Elena exclaimed.

“All right, then. I’ll wait,” Akira said. He couldn’t make sense of Elena’s panic, but going along with Shizuka’s suggestion seemed like a safe bet.

Elena, on the other hand, was at her wits' end. She hadn't agreed to show him her suit, but she couldn't bring herself to say that she didn't want to. Shizuka, who knew why her friend was so flustered, looked all mischief. Sara guiltily struggled to hold back a grin of her own.

Akira had no idea what was going on, but he tried changing the subject again. "So," he wondered, "did you buy your scanners on Shizuka's recommendation too?"

"No, I bought them at a different shop, although I forget which one," Elena replied, leaping at the chance to change the subject. "You don't carry scanners, do you, Shizuka?"

"I sell guns to hunters," the shopkeeper said. "I don't like to stock things that I don't know much about—it causes problems. I will order them on request, but that's the most I can do for you."

"I thought this was supposed to be a general store for hunters," Elena objected. "Scanners seem like a no-brainer, especially since a lot of guns are built to pair with them. Don't you agree, Akira?"

Elena and Shizuka stared at Akira, each seeking a different answer.

Akira dodged the question. "You see, I'm planning on buying a scanner one of these days, so I hoped Shizuka might be able to give me some pointers," he explained.

"Sorry." Shizuka shook her head. "They're outside my area of expertise. If you're looking for recommendations, mine is to ask Elena."

"Me?" Elena said. "I'm not sure what to tell you. It depends on what you're going to use it for—detecting threats, mapping ruins, or helping you pick out relics. The type of hunting you do makes a difference too." She wanted to give Akira some helpful advice, but she knew so much about scanners that she struggled to recommend just one. After hemming and hawing a bit, however, she remembered a device she'd left to gather dust at home. "I know, why don't I sell you one I bought to try out a while back. It wasn't my style, but it's an all-around type, which should make it good for a beginner. What do you say?"

"Does it have quirks that turned you off of it?" Akira asked.

"More like it had no quirks—no identity. To make a long story short..."

Anxious to prove that she wasn't trying to off-load useless junk, Elena launched into a detailed explanation. Scanners marketed to hunters came in two basic types: composite and stand-alone. Stand-alone models were

optimized for a single function, such as motion detection, echolocation, or visual identification. Composite scanners bundled all those features into one package and automatically collated the resulting data to display scouting reports and three-dimensional maps.

Both versions had their pros and cons. Stand-alone scanners could be replaced individually in the event of a breakdown. Hunters could easily upgrade them by adding specialized equipment with new features, or mix and match sensors from different manufacturers. On the other hand, condensing the data they collected into useful reports was a hassle. Universal formatting standards existed, but they only went so far between different kinds of products. Analyzing the mixed output of different devices and transforming it into something of value required considerable technical acumen.

Composite scanners spared their users that trouble, but at the cost of freedom. Most comprised parts from a single manufacturer and needed to be completely replaced or sent out for repairs if any one component failed. They also didn't offer many options for the software that converted their raw data into scouting reports.

Elena preferred to process her own data using a custom array of stand-alone scanners. But composite models had been growing more common recently, so she had tried out a device from a popular product line. In practice, however, she had found it half-baked and left it to gather dust.

"So, if you work in a team, then you might as well have an information specialist, but I think a composite scanner is a better fit for someone hunting alone," Elena concluded. "The model I've got is small, good for solo work, so it shouldn't slow you down. What do you say?"

This sounds like a good deal to me, Alpha added. *The only question is whether you can afford it.*

"Er, I'm interested, but how much would it cost me?" Akira asked.

"Good question. It's used goods from your point of view, and I'm only hanging on to it because it wouldn't resell for much, so how does two million aurum sound?"

Cheaper than the going rate, Elena's offer would still clean out most of the remaining balance in Akira's account. It could easily be his first step toward downgrading to a room without a bath again. But Alpha, Elena, and Shizuka were all in favor, so he quashed his doubts and said, "All right. Can

I just transfer the money to your account?"

"Sure," Elena replied.

Akira tapped his data terminal.

"The payment went through," Elena said, checking her own. "We have a deal. Swing by our place with us, and I'll give you the scanner right away. See you later, Shizuka."

Elena and Sara smiled at their friend and walked out of the store. Akira bobbed his head to her and followed them without another word.

◆

At the hunters' home, Elena asked Akira to wait in the living room while she went to look for his new scanner.

"Sara, keep your clothes on," she warned her partner, who was preparing to strip off her body armor as usual.

"What's the problem?" Sara protested. "This is our place."

"No. Akira's here, remember?"

"Don't worry; I'll keep something on up top." Sara brushed off her concern. "I don't lounge around almost naked like you usually do."

Elena scowled. "I said no. Don't take anything off until he leaves."

"Fine, fine. You made your point." Sara sounded annoyed, but she stopped undressing and went to keep Akira company.

Elena sighed and began trying to figure out what dusty corner she had left the scanner in.

Sara poured three drinks on her way to the living room. "Here," she said, handing one to Akira. "Sit tight while Elena tracks down your new gear."

"Oh, thank you." Akira felt nervous as he accepted the beverage: Sara was still wearing her armored suit, as Elena had insisted, but she had pulled her front zipper down, exposing a swathe of her breasts. Akira's gaze wandered around the room as he tried not to stare when she sat down across from him.

"Don't mind me; I like to let my hair down at home," she said, chuckling at his discomfort. "Why don't you relax too? At least take off the top of your suit."

"No, I'm fine like this," he responded.

“Really? Well, I won’t force you.”

Akira chatted with Sara while they waited for Elena, but his struggle continued. Refusing to look at her while they talked seemed rude, so he ended up facing forward. But he couldn’t keep her in view without also seeing her cleavage, and completely ignoring her chest’s allure was beyond him. Sara found his childish reactions amusing.

“Take a good look if you’re that curious,” she said, smiling suggestively. “Like I said before, I owe you my life, so I’ll let it slide.”

“If you’re doing that on purpose, please zip up,” Akira responded sullenly.

“No, really—don’t hold back!”

“Saying stuff like that will get you hurt one of these days.”

“Oh? You mean you won’t be gentle?”

Akira’s expression stiffened. An inviting note in Sara’s voice suggested that she wouldn’t mind as long as he *was* gentle. But he was also convinced that she was taunting him, so he looked away from her, annoyed and embarrassed.

“Sorry, I guess I took that too far. I’ll close this now.” Sara chuckled and zipped up her suit.

Akira turned back to face her, although he still looked a bit sulky.

“Now, let’s be serious,” she said, still smiling but no longer teasing. “You really ought to take off the top of your suit.”

“Why?” Akira asked, suspicious and still a bit annoyed.

“To mentally shift gears and keep a feel for what’s normal. What you wear affects your mood, and powered suits and body armor are combat gear. You want to stay on your toes in the wasteland, but you shouldn’t carry that attitude home with you. That’s why using your suit as casual wear is a bad idea.” Sara’s expression grew sterner as she spoke. Akira realized she was telling him something important, and he straightened up in his seat. “Sure, always being battle-ready has its upsides, but there are limits. If you stay on high alert twenty-four seven and never take time to unwind, you’ll build up mental fatigue without realizing it. Eventually, it’ll be too much for you, and you’ll collapse.”

Akira thought back to his days in the back alleys. In a sense, his attitude then had been just what Sara was talking about. He hadn’t even been able to take waking up for granted, since the risk of being killed in his sleep had

been a fact of life.

"Some people manage to always stay on the alert, but I don't see that as a good thing either," Sara continued. "It blurs the line between the danger of the battlefield and the safety of everyday life. Either they stop seeing battlefields for what they are, or battle becomes their whole life, and they lose touch with ordinary experiences."

It was true: After throwing himself into hunting, Akira had spent his days in the even harsher environment of the wasteland. But sleeping in hotels had also given him periods of safety. So becoming a hunter had finally given him the ability to make that distinction.

"So, when you're in a safe place, you ought to take off your combat gear to give yourself permission to relax. Even just opening it up in front feels a lot different from being fully suited up."

That psychological shift was part of the reason why Elena and Sara dressed so casually at home. (The other part was that, in the process, they had gotten used to the comfort of letting it all hang out.)

"You're probably living out of a hotel. If it's too cheap for you to feel safe in, I'd say that moving to a nicer one where you can relax is worth the extra cost. You won't be able to get a good rest if you skimp on lodgings. If you're not careful, it can hurt you at least as badly as cutting corners with your ammo." Sara gave him a warm smile, taking the edge off her earnest speech, as she added, "Of course, you've got your own finances to think about, so I can't demand you move to a pricier hotel. Still, this is our home, and it's safe enough for us to lounge around half-dressed, so make yourself comfortable."

Akira considered briefly before responding, "I understand." With a smile and a nod, he peeled off the upper part of his suit.

Sara looked satisfied. "Not to brag, but we spend a bundle on security," she continued, grinning now for a different reason than before. "To prove to ourselves that we can let our hair down here, like I was saying. In fact, it's so safe that Elena doesn't think twice about walking around buck naked."

"D-Does she really?"

"Yeah, even when you were passed out in the other room, she'd wander out of the bath and right into the living room—where we are now—without even bothering to towel off. I warn her, but she won't listen."

"I...I see." Faced with an awkward topic, Akira opted for a

noncommittal response.

Just then, Elena returned with the promised scanner. Her arrival in the middle of that particular conversation made Akira visibly nervous—a fact that was not lost on her.

“What have you been telling him, Sara?” she wondered.

“I was just explaining our home security,” Sara replied. “The benefits of taking off his combat gear and relaxing when he’s in a safe place—that sort of thing.”

“Akira, is she telling the truth?”

“Y-Yes, she is,” answered Akira. His reaction didn’t sit quite right with Elena, but she could see that he really had taken off the top of his suit, so she assumed Sara had tried to undress again and left it at that.

“In that case, I agree,” she said. “Relaxation is important. You’re safe here, so make yourself comfortable.”

“Th-Thank you,” Akira replied, a little stiffly. It was all he could do to keep his imagination from running wild when he looked at Elena.

“Here’s the scanner I sold you,” Elena said, setting down a dusty box in front of him. “A Senba Electronics all-in-one model—called a Midnight Eye, if I remember correctly. It wasn’t for me, but there’s nothing wrong with its specs. I think everything it came with is in there, but if I’m wrong, just chalk it up to the risk of buying used.”

“Thanks a lot. Do I need to do anything special to set it up?”

“I configured it when I tried it out, so it should be ready to go out of the box. Feel free to reinitialize it if my settings give you any trouble. Try mapping your hotel room later to get a feel for using it. I’m guessing you’ve never used a scanner before, and you’ll be a lot safer testing it there than in the wasteland.”

“I understand.”

“Apart from that... Actually, that pretty much covers it. Sorry I can’t give you much in the way of expert tips. I just haven’t spent enough time with that thing.”

“Don’t be. You’ve already done me a huge favor just by selling it to me. Thank you for everything.” Akira bowed politely. “Now, I should be on my way.”

“Leaving so soon?” Elena asked, surprised. “I wish you’d stay and unwind for a bit.”

“Sorry, but I’d like to go home and practice using this thing.”

Elena didn’t want to force the issue, so she and Sara walked him to their front door. He bowed again and left before his unease around Elena became too obvious.

“Sara, what did you tell him?” Elena asked, suspicious once more.

“Hm? Nothing much,” Sara replied. “I guess I did walk into the living room with my top open, but I did it up again because Akira couldn’t stop staring.”

“Oh, is that all?” The explanation satisfied Elena. She asked no more questions—and instead launched into a lecture. “Honestly, how many times do I have to tell you to be more careful about that sort of thing? Even with Akira, you need to be...”

◆

Akira opened the box as soon as he got back to his hotel room. Inside were an oblong device—the scanner itself—and an assortment of accessories. He picked them up and was inspecting them curiously when Alpha spoke up.

Stop dawdling and connect it to your data terminal.

“Are you going to fiddle with this thing too?”

Of course. I’m going to completely overwrite its software so that you can get the most out of my support.

“Oh. Well, I don’t mind as long as it makes my life easier.” Akira hooked the scanner up to his terminal, and Alpha immediately set about taking over the device.

I’ll be done by tomorrow, so we’ll test this out in the ruins then, she said.

“I thought we were gonna steer clear of them until I can rent a car built for the wasteland.”

I only said that we wouldn’t be making relic-hunting trips to far-off ruins. Visiting a relatively safe one to practice using new gear won’t be a problem. Don’t get lazy with your weapon maintenance.

“Sure thing.”

Akira began servicing his arsenal—two AAHs and a CWH. At present, these three rifles were his lifeline. He was still getting used to using the CWH, so he took extra care as he worked on it. Keeping his mind on

maintenance stopped it from wandering back to what he'd heard at Elena and Sara's home.

Meanwhile, as Alpha busied herself with reprogramming the scanner, she also observed his every move.

Chapter 32: The Higaraka Residential District Ruins

A short drive west from Kugamayama City—too far for even veteran hunters to make it on foot, yet close enough for a day trip in a desert vehicle—lay the Higaraka Residential District Ruins. The site had once housed a treasure trove of relics, but over-hunting had stripped it of anything valuable. Now it was just a deserted collection of crumbling structures. Less desirable relics could still be found there, but those hunters who could make a trip that far out found other ruins more profitable, so nowadays few bothered.

Akira was riding across the wasteland toward Higaraka to test the scanner he'd bought from Elena. According to Alpha, this ruin had densely packed buildings and relatively nonthreatening monsters, which made it perfect for trying out new gear. Akira looked forward to the trip with curiosity, as it was his first visit to a ruin other than Kuzusuhara Town, even though he didn't expect to find anything of value.

But I can still bring back any relics we find while training, right, Alpha? he asked.

Go ahead. I don't mind, she replied. *Higaraka is so picked over that hunting there is a waste of time. So trying to find something will make good practice.*

Great! Akira mused that Higaraka might be past its heyday, but only by the standards of hunters who could afford to go there. He still hoped to find more valuable relics there than he could in the Kuzusuhara outskirts.

The ruins came into view. As they drew closer, the scanner sprang to life under Alpha's control.

Elena and Sara are up ahead, she noted to Akira, enlarging a portion of his field of view.

Zooming in with his naked eyes could only do so much, but feeding him video captured through the scanner produced a clear picture. Sure enough,

Elena and Sara were up ahead, standing next to their car as if they were waiting for someone.

You're right. I wonder what they're doing out here. Akira decided he might as well say hello and headed toward them.

Elena greeted Akira with a casual wave—she'd known he was coming thanks to her own sensors.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said. "What brings you out this way? Oh, just so you know: there isn't much left in this area worth finding, so I wouldn't recommend it for relic hunting."

Akira shook his head. "I was planning to practice using my scanner here," he replied, pointing to the device.

"Ah, so that's it. The monsters around here aren't much of a threat, and a lot of buildings with complicated layouts are still standing, so it might be just the place to give that thing its first test run in the wasteland."

"And what brings the two of you here?" Akira asked. "This isn't the kind of place you normally work, is it?"

"We're here for training too. Well, training other people, anyway. We took a job as instructors."

Akira looked a little surprised. He hadn't realized that teaching could be part of a hunter's trade.

At that moment, their scanners detected something approaching. They both turned toward the new arrivals—Akira because Alpha had clued him in, and Elena because she had noticed on her own. An enlarged video popped up in Akira's field of view, showing a car heading their way. Then he recognized the passengers, and his look grew wary.

◆

A car emblazoned with Druncam insignias was crossing the desert from Kugamayama City to the Higaraka Ruins. It had three passengers—Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi.

The trio's performance in the massive attack had earned them limited freedom to operate without a minder. They couldn't accept jobs or make relic-hunting trips on their own initiative, but they could venture into the wasteland unattended if necessary. Their superiors at Druncam had even

told them that the syndicate might consider them full-fledged hunters if they performed well enough in that day's exercise. Needless to say, that had Katsuya champing at the bit.

Officially, their team would no longer need a supervisor once their trainers, Elena and Sara, declared them fully competent. In reality, however, the syndicate was more interested in this test as a move in its negotiations to recruit the two women. If the pair agreed to join Druncam, they would take charge of Katsuya's team. Naturally, the young hunters would then have to put up with rookie treatment for a while longer. Druncam hadn't told Katsuya's team that part, of course. The syndicate had just challenged the trio to prove they were ready to go it alone.

So Katsuya was raring to go, and not only because he was eager to hunt alongside Elena and Sara, even in a mere training exercise.

"We're almost there," he said. "Yumina, Airi, let's make this count."

Yumina was happy to see him so enthusiastic about training; yet she also felt disappointed at the sight of her crush so excited to work with Elena and Sara. That, added to her concern over the gloom she had occasionally glimpsed in him recently, spurred her to put a damper on his high spirits before they got out of hand.

"We'll do our best," she said. "Just try not to piss off Elena and Sara by charging in on your own or something. Don't make me punch you like that time you made a scene while we were on patrol."

"I already told you, I'll be fine," Katsuya responded. "You worry too much."

"Only because you give me reasons to worry. Seriously, don't screw this up."

"I know, I know! Relax. I wouldn't take that tone with Elena and Sara, and they won't trash-talk us like those guys did. So I won't pull another stunt like that. Make sense?"

"Well, you've got a point."

"Don't you also agree, Airi?" Katsuya asked, pressing his advantage now that Yumina had eased off. He expected a curt affirmative and no more, but he only got half his wish.

"I do," Airi replied.

"See?"

But she added, "We'll have no problems unless you're too busy ogling

Sara's boobs to pay attention to us."

"Don't worry," Katsuya answered evasively, a far cry from his confident tone thus far. Now he wasn't even looking at his teammates.

"Hey!" Yumina shouted with renewed intensity. "What's with that wishy-washy answer?! People call you the face of our whole generation of Druncam hunters! Do you have any idea how much trouble we'll be in if you ruin our reputation by giving women hunters creepy looks?!"

"Don't worry!" Katsuya repeated more emphatically. "Okay, conversation over! We're coming up on our rendezvous point with Elena and Sara! We want to pull off this job without a hitch, so both of you check your gear! Leader's orders!"

"Jeez," Yumina muttered, sighing. Airi's expression didn't change. They both knew that Katsuya was trying to bluster his way out of the conversation. But his orders made sense, so they obediently began inspecting their equipment. Despite their squabbles on the drive, the trio was deadly serious about this job.

Katsuya hopped out of the car as soon as they reached the rendezvous point, eager to greet Elena and Sara—

—And froze at the sight of Akira. He couldn't hide his shock: the boy he'd assumed dead was not only very much alive, but standing with Elena and Sara at the job site.

◆

Akira felt puzzled when he saw the young Druncam hunters, but inferring that they must be Elena and Sara's clients, he let the matter go. Not wanting to get in the way, he said his goodbyes to the women and, with a bob of his head, rode off on his motorcycle, heading deeper into the ruins. As he departed, his eyes met Katsuya's stunned gaze for a moment, but he thought nothing of it.

Once he had driven far enough into the ruins that he probably wouldn't get in Elena and Sara's way, Akira stopped his bike and took another look at his surroundings.

It's not much like Kuzusuhara Town, is it? he remarked as he surveyed the ruins with an expression akin to disappointment. He had expected to see some grand new vista, but these dilapidated structures felt much like the all-

too-familiar slums. Nothing suggested this site had once been home to an advanced civilization.

The Higaraka Residential District dates from a different era than Kuzusuhara Town, Alpha said. *They're both ruins now, but this one probably seems closer to the present day.*

The brief explanation only confused Akira, so she launched into a longer one, smiling all the while.

Modern civilization developed by deciphering Old World technology. But the term *Old World* referred not to a single culture, but to all civilizations that had come before. And those past societies had analyzed technology from even more ancient epochs, which they had also called the "Old World." Each new civilization had scraped together Old World relics, the fragments of its predecessors' wisdom and glory, in order to rebuild its world. Then, intoxicated by that power, it had crumbled, swallowed up by forces it could not fully control. The wreckage of these ruined cultures became fragments of the past scattered throughout the world and, ultimately, the foundation on which the next society would build.

Thus, the history of the Old World was a cycle of collapse and reconstruction. Modern society was safe for now, but there was no guarantee it wouldn't end up as just another link in the chain. Even Akira's hometown, Alpha said, might be known as the Kugamayama City Ruins in a hundred years' time.

That made a powerful impression on Akira, who felt as if he had touched part of a grand history. Yet he had no choice but to live in the present. He wouldn't blame anyone else for dwelling on the past, but he was more concerned with how his todays would affect his tomorrows.

So he turned his attention to training.

He put on one of the accessories that had come with his scanner—a display visor akin to a slim pair of glasses. The transparent screen didn't block his view and could be raised to his forehead if it ever became inconvenient. And since the device had originally belonged to Elena, it was small enough for Akira to wear comfortably. He started as overlays displaying data on his surroundings immediately filled his view.

So, er, what do I do now? he asked.

I'm still checking this scanner's capabilities, so just explore the ruins and get a feel for using it while I do, Alpha replied.

How am I supposed to do that when I've got no clue how it works?

I'll bring up the manual for you, so put your reading lessons to work and figure that out for yourself. I can operate the scanner most of the time, but people will get suspicious if you don't know anything about it.

The scanner's instruction manual appeared in Akira's view—Alpha's doing, not a feature of the device. He wanted the ability to read documents like this without help as much as Alpha wanted him to learn it. So he followed her directions and got to work, wrestling with the manual, the scanner's controls, and the data on his display as he headed deeper in.

Akira did his best to handle everything on his own, from driving his motorcycle to scouting for enemies and operating his scanner. Even so, Alpha alerted him to the presence of weak monsters before he noticed them himself. He took them out with his AAH and moved on. Why had he failed to detect the threat on his own? Was it due to his scanner's specs, or maybe because of the way he had it configured? Had he overlooked an alert? Doubts about his competence plagued him as he wandered the ruins.

He poked around in the remains of buildings, looking for relics, and found long-abandoned eating utensils and a few other odds and ends. These were technically products of the Old World, but they wouldn't be worth much, given the abundance of modern-day equivalents. They were still lying here because the hunters who had risked their lives and fortunes in these ruins hadn't deemed them worth taking. Akira hesitated briefly, but ended up putting them back where he'd found them.

Despite the lack of worthwhile finds, the buildings themselves were in decent shape. Long years of degradation had not overcome their sturdy Old World construction.

Think anyone secretly lives in places like this? he mused, looking the structures over inside and out.

If so, they must be in so much trouble that even lying low in the slums isn't an option, Alpha responded. *They would have to procure their own food and water while fending off monsters and bandits.*

Meaning most people would be better off in the slums?

Exactly.

Akira continued exploring until he came across a partially destroyed house.

What happened here? he asked, a suspicious scowl crossing his face.

Crumbling buildings were all around him, but as far as he could tell, this destruction was recent. Something massive seemed to have passed through the area, and some of the smashed walls appeared to have been bitten through.

Alpha, didn't you say only weak monsters live in this place? he demanded.

According to my research, yes, she replied. *Elena said so too.*

You're right, she did. Guess I'm overthinking things.

But we can't trust old data, Alpha added. *That massive attack might have altered the ecosystem, or some monsters that escaped extermination then could have gone to ground here. Don't let your guard down.*

Something was bothering Akira. His intuition was sensitive to trouble, if nothing else. It had helped him survive long enough to meet Alpha—and it was also part of the reason he considered himself so unlucky.

◆

Katsuya's team lined up in front of Elena and Sara, ready for their training in the Higaraka Ruins. Yumina and Airi were focused, but Katsuya's concentration was wavering after his brief glimpse of Akira.

"You're going to be exploring these ruins at your own discretion," Elena told them, looking stern. "This is a training exercise, and we're your instructors, but we don't think you need us to tell you how to do every little thing at this point, so we won't. Make your own decisions."

"The monsters here shouldn't be too dangerous, but always take reports like that with a grain of salt," Sara added, smiling as usual. "We'll be observing you from a distance, so call for help immediately if something goes wrong."

"But try to act as if we're not here. Pretend that the three of you came here alone."

"Don't let your pride stop you from calling us right away, though," Sara cautioned. "Training or not, that kind of stubbornness causes trouble."

"We'll evaluate you after you finish," Elena concluded. "Normally, we'd also grade you on when you decide to turn back, but stay out for no longer than four hours today. Of course, you're free to withdraw before then. Knowing when to stop is an important skill."

Elena and Sara glanced at each other and nodded, confirming that they had nothing more to add.

"Any questions?" Elena said, surveying the trio. "If not, let's begin."

Yumina was the first to respond.

"You told us to 'explore,' but what are we trying to do here, exactly?" she asked.

"Figuring that out is part of your training," Sara answered. "Act like you're here on a normal relic-hunting trip."

"But I thought there were no valuable relics left in these ruins?" Yumina persisted.

"Forget about that for the sake of the exercise. Bringing you back alive is part of our job, so we can't exactly train you in a place full of priceless relics and deadly monsters."

"We know that there's nothing good left here as well as you do. So, don't worry: we won't mark you down if the only relics you can find aren't worth much," Elena added. But Yumina still looked unconvinced, so Elena elaborated: "We'll be evaluating you based on a variety of different factors, like how long it takes you to write off one site and move on to the next, and how alert you are to your surroundings. So gather relics as you would normally. Of course, we'll give you bonus points if you find anything valuable that everyone else has overlooked."

"I understand." Yumina nodded, satisfied.

Airi spoke up. "Are there any minimum requirements you expect us to meet during this exercise? Our objectives will affect how we act."

"No," Elena answered again. "If you need a goal, it's to produce the greatest possible results with the least possible effort. Earn returns that justify your risks, and keep making the best choices, given your abilities, as long as you can. If you ask me, decision-making is the most important part of hunting." Mentally, she laughed at herself: she had nearly died in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins because she had chosen poorly.

"Ordinarily, your first question should be whether it's even worth hunting for relics in Higaraka, like Yumina asked," Sara added, picking up on Elena's feelings and grinning. "But since this is a training exercise, assume you had a good reason for coming here."

"So, getting in and out quickly is still a valid goal," Elena continued, setting her own past aside. "If you do that, just explain to us why you'll be

retreating and what you plan to do next. We'll evaluate you based on your answers."

"I understand," Airi said. "I'll aim to explore efficiently without retreating."

Once she finished, all eyes were on Katsuya, who had yet to speak. He had a question, but he couldn't bring himself to ask it. Elena guessed his inner turmoil from his expression.

"If anything is bothering you, speak up," she said, smiling. "Even if it seems trivial, you're better off asking now than keeping silent and regretting it later. The exercise hasn't started yet, so nothing you ask now will affect your evaluation."

"O-Okay," Katsuya said, encouraged. "What's your connection to that guy who was just here?"

Caught off guard, the rest of the group was silent. Elena and Sara exchanged looks. Airi's expression remained impassive, save that her brow furrowed slightly.

Yumina sighed, smiled, and swung back her fist.

Katsuya, who was blessed with exceptional powers of observation, spotted Yumina's windup and dodged out of range of her punch.

"Hang on!" he pleaded frantically. "You've got the wrong idea! I didn't mean it like that!"

"Druncam hired Elena and Sara to train us," Yumina growled, inching toward him with her fist still raised. "And as soon as we get on site, you ask two women about their relationship with a man. How are we *supposed* to take a question like that?"

"I'm telling you, that's not what I meant! I recognized him from that patrol! Remember the guy who took the emergency job on his own? That was him!"

"Not ringing any bells." Yumina barely remembered Akira. At the time, she had been focused on stopping Katsuya, and even after she'd succeeded, she'd had no concern to spare for strangers. "I'm sorry, Elena. I'll shut him up right away, so please don't count this against us."

She was determined to physically plug Katsuya's mouth before he did any more damage to his reputation. For once, Airi didn't come to his defense. In a way, the team was reenacting their performance on that patrol —their leader was causing trouble instead of stopping it, and his

subordinate was about to subdue him by force.

But Elena and Sara didn't think less of them for acting out a little. A bit of horseplay was an effective way to ease tensions in a close-knit team, and staying too tense, too on edge to crack jokes or make small talk, could cost lives on long treks through the wasteland. So, as far as they were concerned, this behavior was still acceptable.

Shikarabe and Druncam's other veterans felt much the same way and joked with each other while they worked. But they also felt that the syndicate gave the young hunters preferential treatment, so they tended to fault the rookies for behavior they wouldn't normally consider out of line. Druncam's old hands found themselves thinking that if the kids couldn't pull their own weight, the least they could do was stay focused; and the veterans' contempt and resentment for their younger colleagues grew as a result.

"Yumina! Calm down!" Katsuya shouted, holding his hands placatingly in front of him. Then, he looked imploringly at his other teammate. "Airi, say something!"

"You reap what you sow."

"Are you trying to egg her on?!"

Elena would have been happy to let them work out their own differences and factor the time it took into their evaluation. But part of their conversation had piqued her curiosity, so she intervened. "Yumina, relax."

"All right." After a tense moment, Yumina lowered her fist, much to Katsuya's relief.

"Now, Katsuya. If you didn't mean it like that, how *did* you mean it?" Elena asked. "I want a full explanation."

"Well, you see..."

Katsuya related his history with Akira. He kept his personal feelings out of it, but made clear his shock at seeing someone he had reasonably taken for dead not only alive but chatting with Elena and Sara.

"I see," Elena said tersely once he had finished. "That question definitely has nothing to do with this training exercise."

"W-Well, no," Katsuya admitted.

"Then, since you have nothing to ask, let's begin. Get moving."

Katsuya hesitated briefly. Now that he'd asked his awkward question, he wanted some information about the women's involvement with Akira to

show for it. Yumina and Airi's menacing silence, however, proved too much for him.

"U-Understood!" he responded, a note of panic entering his voice. "Beginning expedition! Yumina! Airi! Let's go!"

He jogged off toward the ruins with Airi close at his heels. Yumina bowed apologetically to their instructors, then followed.

While Sara smirked, Elena considered what they had just heard.

"I knew that Akira fought in the defense of the city," she mused, "but Katsuya made it sound like he got himself into a pretty dire situation."

Elena had an idea of the value of Akira's motorcycle, the equipment he'd purchased from Shizuka, and of course the scanner he'd bought from Elena herself. So she was able to estimate his earnings from the battle. And after what Katsuya had told her, she could also guess at the conditions he had fought under—a battlefield so unforgiving that assuming he had died there really was the natural conclusion. She couldn't blame Katsuya for being shocked.

But although Akira's achievement impressed Elena, that wasn't the only feeling it inspired in her. Sara shared her partner's complicated sentiments and put it into words.

"Akira's gonna outdo us one of these days if we're not careful. We might not be able to tout our experience much longer."

"Well, he already saved our lives once, so what's the point of getting hung up on pride now?" Elena countered, forcing a confident chuckle.

"You've got me there," Sara admitted. "Still, we'd better work hard so we can keep ahead of him for a while."

Perhaps Akira had rescued them, but they were still veteran hunters, and he wouldn't stop looking to them for advice just yet. With that thought in mind, they smiled at each other as they set off after Katsuya's team.

Chapter 33: Users of the Old Domain

As Akira trekked through the ruins, he stumbled across a house that stood out from the crumbling edifices around it. The building was as timeworn as the rest, but its size and design hinted at the affluence of those who had once lived there. And because such a sumptuous mansion might still house valuable relics, he parked his motorbike and went to investigate.

His hopes were quickly dashed. The mansion contained as many rooms as its massive size had led him to expect, but almost all were empty. Countless previous hunters, possessed by the same thought, had raced to strip the house of valuables. Quick to assume that anything found in such a luxurious residence would fetch a high price, the looters had even taken the nearly worthless artifacts that no hunter would have given a second glance in a dingier setting. Only dust and grime remained.

Akira stubbornly kept searching, but the most he found in any room was fragments of broken furniture. His inspections grew more cursory with each failure. Eventually, he got sick of wasting his time on empty chambers. He was about to pass the next one after only a glance inside when Alpha called him to a halt.

Wait, Akira. Go into that room.

He did as he was told and took a closer look around. Alpha wouldn't have bothered to order him around unless there was something to find, he assumed, so he inspected every nook and cranny he could think of. But try as he might, he found nothing to suggest it was anything besides another empty room.

"What's so special about this place?" he asked, with a puzzled frown. "There's nothing here."

There's some sort of hidden door, Alpha corrected him. *I think it leads to a secret room, probably a basement.*

Dust had accumulated in the grooves of the tiled floor, but Alpha highlighted a section of it with a green outline when Akira focused on the spot she pointed to. He approached and crouched down to take a closer

look. Finding one groove less dusty than the rest, he slid his fingers into it and pried up a tile. It concealed a handle.

"This it?" he asked. "How'd you find it?"

I analyzed the data from your scanner with my advanced computational ability. Impressed? Alpha's smile practically begged for a compliment.

"Yeah, I am."

What, no snide remark? she asked, taken aback by his frank reply.

"Huh? Nah. I mean, that was really something."

I wish you were this forthright more of the time.

"Like when?"

Well, for example... Alpha smiled seductively.

Akira knew where this was going. "Don't change clothes!" he shouted. "Or take them off!"

Alpha laughed mockingly, but she kept her clothes on. Although he didn't realize it, she had used this exchange to gauge his reactions. Contrary to her expectations, he had not brushed off her request for praise as he usually did. This difference between prediction and result meant that her observations of Akira and her grasp of his personality were still insufficient. She would need to study him further and revise her predictive model, she decided, allowing no hint of her calculations to show on her smiling face.

Akira let out his breath and grasped the handle set in the floor.

He opened the trapdoor and descended into the basement. The subterranean chamber was devoid of light sources, and he couldn't rely on what little illumination filtered through the entrance from the dim room above. He switched on his portable light, hoping that this hidden chamber still contained something of value.

But when the man-made radiance dispelled the darkness of long years, it revealed only an empty space bounded by concrete on all sides. Apart from walls, floor, and ceiling, there was nothing to see but dust, and little even of that. Akira turned to Alpha in mute disappointment.

It's a shame, but someone must have found this place and cleared it out before us, she said with forced cheerfulness. *Don't blame me.*

He didn't, but he did find her defensive tone amusing—it wasn't every day that Alpha made excuses. So, half-jokingly, he voiced the first thought that popped into his head.

“Hey, what if there’s another hidden door in here?”

I don’t detect one, but why not look around, just in case? If there’s a door I can’t find, then your scanner’s sensitivity is the problem. Try moving it as close as possible to the walls and floor.

Since her answer left room for hope, Akira investigated further. His nose practically brushed the walls as he inspected them for gaps. He crawled around on the floor, hunting for spots free from dust. But he found nothing that even suggested a secret door.

“I’m drawing a blank,” he said. “How about you, Alpha?”

Sorry, but I don’t see anything either.

“Might as well leave, then.”

Akira switched off his light and began to climb the exit ladder. But then he stopped, reached up, and closed the trapdoor. Without a light source, the basement reverted to absolute darkness. Akira swept his gaze over the room but could see nothing.

“No such luck, huh?” he said. “I thought I might spot light shining through a crack. Although, now that I think about it, that wouldn’t work underground, anyway.”

He had finally given up. But just as he was about to return to the room above, Alpha surprised him with a cheerful announcement.

Actually, I found something.

Akira could see her clearly, even in pitch darkness, since her visual data was superimposed on his sight. Soon, he also had a colorless view of the basement.

I just augmented your vision with a video I made from the data your scanner picks up, Alpha explained. *It’s in black-and-white, but that should be good enough to find your way around.*

Seeing her vibrant figure in the monochrome room gave Akira a strange feeling, as if he were watching a black-and-white film with a single colorized element.

“I can see clearly now,” he said. “What did you find?”

Alpha pointed to the floor, which bore a design of two human footprints inside a circle, indicating a place to stand.

It’s drawn in transparent, phosphorescent paint. It looks obvious now that I’m highlighting it, but the glow is actually so faint that I can barely detect it, even in total darkness with the scanner at maximum sensitivity.

“Am I supposed to stand here?” Akira asked. “What’s something like this doing in a basement?”

Beats me. I don’t have all the answers.

“Well, it took us a while to find, so I might as well give it a try.”

Akira planted his feet over the mark on the floor. An instant later, he saw a woman dressed as a maid. Like Alpha, she appeared in vivid color amid the grayscale scenery.

He was startled but assumed that this was more of Alpha’s handiwork. When he turned to his companion, however, she said, *I guess a reaction was too much to hope for.*

Akira frowned. “Alpha, what’s the big idea?”

What do you mean? She looked puzzled, as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

“You know what I mean. The lady right in front of—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Alpha seized control of his suit, disregarding the strain it put on his body, and forced him out of the circle at top speed. Akira couldn’t keep up. He felt like an invisible force had flung him aside, and his body ached from head to toe.

“What was that for?!” he snapped, glaring resentfully at Alpha.

But Alpha ignored his question. *Do you have a headache?!* she demanded, looking deadly serious. *Any nausea or trouble focusing?! Can you hear my voice?! Can you see me clearly?!*

“I...I’m fine,” he said, taken aback by her panic but anxious to calm her down. “No headaches, I don’t feel like throwing up, and my mind’s clear. I just took a few bumps.”

I see. I’m glad. Alpha’s relief was palpable, but she still looked grave. From her attitude, Akira gleaned that he had just been in danger, although he didn’t know how—and while he had escaped for now, he wasn’t out of the woods yet.

Akira, can you still see the person you mentioned earlier? Alpha asked.

He looked back at where the woman had been, but she had vanished without a trace.

“No, not anymore,” he said. “What just happened? Why were you in such a rush?”

I’m about to explain. You might have had a brush with death a moment ago.

“D-Death? What are you talking about?”

Do you remember when I told you that your brain is capable of a kind of wireless communication? People with that ability are called Old Domain Users, and the negative effects of using it could have killed you.

That stunned Akira. To help calm his nerves, Alpha carefully gave him a more detailed explanation. The Old Domain was a communications network believed to link surviving Old World facilities across the East. Old Domain Users could access this network without using the specialized equipment that normal people required to do so.

And you’re one of those Users, although I doubt you realize it, she added. *That’s why you’re able to perceive me and reap the benefits of my support.*

Akira wasn’t exactly shocked to learn that there was something unusual about him. Alpha had already told him something similar when he’d questioned his ability to see and hear her.

“So, what does that have to do with me nearly dying?” he asked suspiciously. “Even if that woman was something only Users can see, how does that make her dangerous? I would have died from looking at you by now if that was all it took.”

Not all Users are created equal. The quantity and type of information that each one can extract from the Old Domain varies greatly. You and I just happen to be highly compatible. Alpha didn’t elaborate on the consequences of an incompatible User seeing her. *The woman you saw was probably a visual stored in the Old Domain. In the Old World, incorporeal beings like her assisted people in many ways via holograms and augmented reality.*

Most so-called “ghosts of the Old World” actually fell into one of these categories. They offered anyone who could see them guidance in the ruins. But because their data was long out of date, they had become sources of confusion, misleading explorers into piles of rubble or dens of monsters.

These systems served as guides, receptionists, sales associates, basic secretaries, and so on. A visible form wasn’t strictly necessary, Alpha added, *but people found it easier to interact with the systems that way.*

Akira understood the danger of blindly following these “ghosts,” but that didn’t explain why Alpha had shoved him aside. “But just seeing one of those things isn’t the end of the world, right?” he asked, confused. “Why

were you so desperate to get me out of there?"

I couldn't detect the person you saw. What did she look like?

"A woman dressed like a maid. She didn't seem dangerous."

Because she isn't meant to be. The problem is that she's an Old World system and probably won't consider the needs of modern humans. Alpha's expression hardened. *Because you could see her, she might mistakenly assume that you can process any transmission she sends you. That's enough to put you at risk.*

Akira flinched in the face of her stern look—the same look she used when she alerted him to threats in combat. "So, what's so bad about her getting the wrong idea?" he asked.

Suppose that the woman you saw was an AI overseeing this mansion, and she asked you if you needed information about it. How would you respond?

"I'd say 'Yes,' or maybe 'Yes, please.'"

Then you could easily die.

"Just for that?!" Akira couldn't help raising his voice in surprise.

I told you, she probably won't consider the needs of modern humans, Alpha repeated emphatically. *She might send you a massive quantity of data on this building.*

An Old World rundown on a single house could still be an extraordinary quantity of data by modern standards, she explained. Even if Akira only asked for maps and structural plans, he might get flooded with enough detail to calculate the motion of every last molecule.

If you're lucky, your brain will treat any information beyond its capacity as noise and ignore it. If you're not, and it tries to process everything, you'll run a high risk of brain death. A lot of Users apparently go out that way.

Akira was speechless. It took him some time to get over his shock. He started taking deep breaths. Alpha waited for him to steady his nerves.

Calmer now? she asked at last.

"M-More or less," he replied. "Alpha, how *should* I answer that question?"

I'm glad you asked. I'd suggest you say no. You could also try asking for the data in a format you can process visually or as a simplified image file. Other options include explaining a file type that your data terminal will recognize and requesting to receive it there.

If an infinite-resolution image existed, a glance at it would yield only an infinitesimal quantity of information. Requesting that data be visually comprehensible placed a limit on its quantity. Meanwhile, overloading his terminal might break the device but couldn't harm its owner.

"And as long as I say one of those things, I'll be in the clear?"

No. These precautions will only offer you some protections against polite systems that seek your consent. It won't do you any good if they send you the data without asking as a "freebie."

Even in the present day, advertisements often played without waiting for permission. A pop-up with the volume of an Old World data transmission could doom Akira the moment he set eyes on it.

"So, I'm shit out of luck if that happens?" he asked, his scowl deepening as he finally realized why Alpha had been in such a hurry to move him. "Isn't there anything I can do?"

He'd just learned that he was an Old Domain User and that the ability came with a risk of instant death. After all that, he didn't want to hear that there was nothing he could do about it. His desire for a solution was plain on his face.

Then, an abrupt change came over Alpha.

May I, Alpha, act as a relay with regard to incoming information from network sources in order to prevent fatal damage to Subject's life support? she asked, with an impersonal look that Akira recognized. *Specific procedures comprise, in the first instance—*

"You may," Akira interrupted her, remembering the last time she had acted this way.

Consent registered. In her usual cheerful tone, she added, *Well, you've got a filter now, so don't worry too much.*

"That was that thing again, right? The annoying red tape you had to deal with before?" Akira asked, secretly relieved that she was back to her usual self. "And you couldn't do this ahead of time because you needed permission to ask for permission?"

Pretty much. You gave me the go ahead to do a lot before, but there was still a lot more that permission didn't cover.

"Don't tell me there's even more stuff you can't do yet."

Yes, tons, although I won't and can't tell you the specifics. I assume you can guess why? she said, smiling significantly.

“Yeah, I know.” Akira grinned back. “It’d take a hundred years to explain, and you’re not even allowed to bring it up yet, right?”

Alpha beamed. *I’m glad we’re on the same page.*

A trace of exasperation entered Akira’s smile, but he felt relieved now that he ran a much lower risk of suddenly dropping dead. Then, bracing himself, he switched on his light, restoring the room to color, and returned to the mark on the floor. Once again, the woman dressed as a maid appeared.

She seemed completely real as she stood quietly before him, a pleasant smile on her lovely face. Her black-and-white uniform, which seemed out of place in the drab basement, was accented with fashionable frills that could serve no practical purpose. Lavish quantities of expensive-looking fabric had gone into the outfit, which entirely concealed her smooth skin below her neck. Her black shoes were just barely visible below the hem of her skirt, and her hands were ensconced in white gloves. The incredibly long ribbon that held her black hair in place floated in defiance of gravity. But despite appearances, the woman had no physical presence.

Akira stared curiously at this being that resembled Alpha.

“You said you can’t see her, right, Alpha?” he asked.

Don’t worry, Alpha replied. *Getting your consent fixed that problem. But she can’t detect me, so tread carefully.*

“Got it. So, to her, I must look like I’m talking to myself.”

Assuming she can see you. If she’s just visual data, then she might as well be a woman-shaped signboard.

“Now that you mention it, she hasn’t moved. Er, can you hear me?”

The woman answered Akira’s question with a courteous bow.

It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir, she said. *Do you wish to register as a new user?*

Akira didn’t understand the question, but he recalled Alpha’s warnings and decided to decline for the time being.

“No,” he said. “I’d just like to ask you a few—”

As you wish. I eagerly await your patronage. The woman bowed to Akira again and then vanished.

A moment passed in silence. Then, he said, “What was that about?”

She’s incorporeal, responds to speech, and disappears when you turn her down, Alpha replied. *Why not step back for a moment, then try again*

and tell her you'll consider her offer, but you'd like more details?

"Worth a shot." Akira retreated. When he returned to stand on the same spot again, the woman reappeared. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Once again, the woman sprang to life and bowed.

It's a pleasure to meet you, sir, she said. *Do you wish to register as a new user?*

Alpha spoke up. *I'm interested, but I'd like to know a bit more. Would you mind answering some questions?*

The woman, however, did not respond.

Well, that didn't work. Akira, get out your terminal.

Akira did so, and Alpha spoke through its speakers.

"I'd like to weigh my options, and it would help if you sent your data to this terminal. Can you do that for me?"

Her voice rang out clearly—no longer telepathy for Akira's ears alone. Yet the woman remained unresponsive.

It looks like that won't work either, Alpha said. *Now you try.*

"I'd like you to send your data to this terminal. Can you?" Akira repeated.

Certainly, the woman responded at last. *I sincerely appreciate your interest.*

Akira looked at his data terminal, but there was no change that he could see.

No sign of incoming data, Alpha informed him. *Unfortunately, it must be in a format this terminal can't receive. What do you want to do now? Give up and go home?*

"What else can we do?"

We could try accessing the information through you. If you can see her, you must be able to receive data from her. But as I said earlier, there are risks. I'll do my best to minimize them, but I make no guarantees. What do you say?

Akira considered briefly. "I'll do it. We've come too far to leave without learning anything. I'd always wonder what I missed out on. Besides, I'm a hunter—danger comes with the territory."

All right. Give her strict orders to send you the data a little at a time. And get out of there immediately if you feel strange in any way; she probably can't transmit to you unless you're standing on that spot.

Akira steeled himself and said, “Send the data as slowly as you can, but to me, not my terminal.”

Certainly, the woman responded, bowing again. *I will now begin the transmission.*

Akira got ready to move immediately if anything went wrong. But despite his resolve, he experienced nothing particularly out of the ordinary —no headaches, no nausea, no loss of focus or blurred vision. He looked puzzled, wondering if one of those compatibility issues Alpha had mentioned had prevented him from receiving additional data.

All done, Akira, Alpha breezily announced. *You’re in the clear now.*

“Done?” he repeated. “But I didn’t feel anything.”

Once it got started, I fixed things so that I could receive the data directly without going through you. I didn’t want to involve you in the transmission more than I could help, so I just exchanged contact info at first, and now I can get in touch with her and ask her questions directly. At least, that’s the simple version.

“Oh, okay. What was that woman, anyway? She disappeared again.”

It’s a long story, so let’s call it a day and head home. You won’t make any money off this directly, but we have quite a lot to show for our trouble. We’ve had a surprisingly productive day, considering we only planned on giving your scanner a test run.

“Really? Well, if you say so. Tell me about it later.”

Akira left the basement satisfied. Risking his life had been worth it, even if he wasn’t yet sure how.

Chapter 34: The Gluttonous Crocodile

Meanwhile, Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi continued their training expedition in Higaraka, and so far everything was going smoothly. Each took turns standing guard while their teammates scoured a long-abandoned house for relics, swapping roles periodically so that no one would get bored and lose their focus. When the lookout spotted a monster, the others paused their search, and all three joined forces to eliminate the threat. Once they finished with one house, they divvied up scouting duties and moved on to the next, maintaining a perfect balance between alertness and calm as they traversed the ruins. The team was giving a textbook demonstration of proper relic-hunting procedure—more than sufficient to earn a passing grade from Elena and Sara, who observed from a short distance away.

Yet Katsuya wasn't satisfied.

"I knew what to expect, but everything left here really is cheap junk," he grumbled, sighing as he picked up a relic. He and Yumina were searching this house while Airi stood guard outside, and despite his best efforts, he had found nothing noteworthy.

"Nothing we can do about that," Yumina soothed him, smiling. "Even Elena and Sara said this place was picked clean, remember?"

"You've got a point."

"Come on. I know that relic's not worth much, but make sure you pack it up anyway. They promised not to mark us down for poor finds, but they won't be so kind if we come back empty-handed."

"I know, I know." Katsuya stowed the bit of unidentifiable Old World bric-a-brac in the backpack he carried for the purpose. It already contained a number of what passed for decent relics from Higaraka—namely, nothing of value. "I guess searching normally won't net us any unexpected finds. Too bad we can't rent a scanner with AR support, like we used on the Kuzusuhara outskirts that one time."

"We'd never get permission," Yumina said. "Our ranks are too low. We could try putting in a request through our supervisor for— No, scratch that.

Searching Higaraka is nowhere near a good enough reason."

"Yeah, you've got that right," Katsuya admitted.

Their team was allowed a certain degree of freedom, but they were still under Shikarabe's command. If they wanted anything, then Katsuya, as the team leader, would have to ask the older hunter for it—an unpleasant prospect, and almost guaranteed to fail. Yumina understood Katsuya's feelings on the matter, so she had changed her response midsentence and regretted bringing it up.

"That reminds me," she said, hoping to change the subject, "I hear you saw something weird on the AR scanners that time. What was it?"

"Huh?" Katsuya thought back. "Well, it was, er, not that big a deal, looking back on it now. Probably a run-of-the-mill glitch, you know? Just some junk data displaying wrong, I bet."

"I see." Yumina could tell that he was trying to hide something, but she was only interested in steering the conversation away from Shikarabe, so she let the matter drop.

For his part, Katsuya still couldn't make sense of the experience, but he thanked his lucky stars that Yumina hadn't pressed him for details. He couldn't bring himself to admit that he'd seen a gorgeous naked girl, even if she *had* been see-through...

◆

Rumors swirled: somewhere in the ruins near Kugamayama City rested an undiscovered treasure trove of relics that even a child could reach. At a time when the reports were still considered credible, Druncam joined in the hunt. But a thorough search of the vast Kuzusuhara outskirts would require considerable man power, and the syndicate would never waste its veteran hunters on what might turn out to be a wild goose chase. So it organized a search party mostly of rookies, on the theory that the exercise would double as training. A handful of experienced hunters would stake out the perimeter of a vast, circular area, which a large force of trainees could then explore in relative safety. Druncam's higher-ups didn't give the operation much thought—if they found the rumored cache, they would make a fortune; if not, then at least the kids would get some practice in.

Splitting up was the most efficient way to search the vast area, so

Katsuya made his way through the ruins alone. He still had orders to follow, but solo work offered far greater freedom than operating in a supervised team, and the opportunity exhilarated him. The AR-compatible scanner he wore was normally forbidden to young hunters. But he wasn't being given special treatment—the whole search party had received similar equipment to compensate for their inexperience.

Druncam had directed its young hunters to seek out augmented reality systems in the ruins. The syndicate believed that some recently activated AR might have guided people to a previously undiscovered area, giving rise to the rumors. And so, Katsuya studied his crumbling surroundings through display goggles hooked up to his borrowed sensors. His orders were to report to his superiors immediately if he spotted a ghost of the Old World.

Katsuya had never seen a ghost, and he was eager for the experience. But his enthusiasm produced no results—hardly surprising, since the relics he was seeking never existed in the first place. As time passed uneventfully, his dissatisfaction grew, wearing away at his morale. At last, he sighed and let his head droop, fatigued from his fruitless treks in the shadows of the skyscrapers.

Then a glow crossed his field of view. He turned his head, instinctively following the light with his eyes. It was so faint that he might not have noticed it if not for the gloom, but he could definitely see it. And it wasn't alone—more lights than he could count were flitting through the darkness. All were dim and flickered erratically, but they held Katsuya's interest. He was supposed to report any unusual discoveries without delay. Yet his orders slipped from his mind as he followed the lights, which seemed to be leading him around a bend in the road. Then, as he turned the corner, he was shocked to see a naked girl standing where the lights congregated.

She looked stunning. And yet there was something inexplicable about her—although not an adult, she possessed an air of maturity that made it difficult to see her as a child. Her uncanny appearance struck a perfect balance between the two, embodying the beauty of each without contradiction. Her unearthly charms entranced Katsuya, but he snapped back to reality when he noticed something else odd. The girl's body was translucent, allowing him to see through her to the ruined structures beyond.

“I-Is this a ghost of the Old World?” he wondered aloud. “I mean, she’s see-through, but— Oops. Almost forgot to switch off my screen.”

When Katsuya encountered anything that seemed like augmented reality, the proper procedure was to switch off his display to avoid confusion and then contact his superiors. So he disabled his scanner’s AR support, then frowned. The girl was still there. He kept fiddling with the settings, assuming that he had made a mistake operating the unfamiliar device. The spectral girl, however, remained exactly as she was.

And all the while, she was moving toward him, smiling.

This might be trouble.

Feeling a sense of panic that he could not explain, he gave up on the scanner and skipped straight to his report. “Er, this is Katsuya. I’m looking at—”

“This is HQ,” a gruff man’s voice from his communicator interrupted. “What number are you? I need your number.”

“Fifty-Eight,” Katsuya answered stiffly. HQ’s high-handed treatment annoyed him, but that helped him to regain his cool.

“Roger that, Fifty-Eight. What happened?”

“I found one of those ‘ghosts of the Old World,’ only it doesn’t go away when I turn off my AR.”

“Wait a sec. I’ll patch into your scanner and check.” The man fell silent for a moment. “Fifty-Eight, I can’t detect anything like a ghost on my end.”

“I’m not lying!” Katsuya snapped. “I really can see her, and I can’t turn her off!”

“I never said you were making it up,” came the exasperated response. “You’re in the ruins. Could be transmission issues with the AR data, could be a bug with your display. Calm down.”

“All right,” Katsuya grumbled.

“I’ll send someone else your way and see if I can pick up the data through them. Stand by where you are until they get there. Leave our systems linked, just in case.”

“Roger.”

The girl was right beside Katsuya now. He could have reached out and touched her if he wanted to. Her lips moved as if she were speaking, but he couldn’t hear a thing. He tried not to stare, flustered at receiving cheerful attention from a naked beauty. Apart from her translucency, she looked

perfectly real. He reached out to her without knowing why and felt relieved when he saw his hand pass through her. She was augmented reality after all.

As Katsuya took in the situation, he shifted his attention to the girl's mouth. He did his best to read her lips—although he struggled to keep his mind from dwelling on their shapeliness instead—but he drew a blank.

Then Katsuya had a strange sensation. "Huh?" he muttered. He still couldn't hear the girl, but he felt as if he could understand what she was saying. Was he hallucinating this soundless voice? He wasn't sure. Nevertheless, he mentally strained to hear the girl's silent words. As he focused more and more, he finally began to feel that he could make out something on the edge of hearing. Eager for more, he concentrated even harder.

Then, for just a moment, he thought that he really had heard something. He frowned, puzzled, while the girl seemed to smile more brightly, and a tinge of color entered her translucent form.

Suddenly, another voice sounded clearly in his ears. "Hey! What happened?"

It was Togami, another of Druncam's young hunters. Their superiors had ordered him to check on the situation.

"Oh, I found one of those ghosts of the Old World," Katsuya replied, turning to face the other boy.

Togami activated his scanner and surveyed the area, but nothing AR stood out to him.

"Where?" he asked.

"Right here," said Katsuya.

"Just tell me where it is."

"Like I said, it's right— Huh?" Katsuya tried to point to the girl, but she was no longer there.

Togami gave him an annoyed look and called their superiors. "This is Eighty-Seven. I've arrived at the designated point. Unable to confirm Fifty-Eight's report."

"This is HQ. Roger that," came the response.

"I'm telling you, I really saw her!" Katsuya anxiously cut in.

"And *I* told *you* that I'm not sayin' you didn't!" barked the man from headquarters. "Don't lose it over every little thing, Fifty-Eight!"

That silenced Katsuya. Togami looked even more fed up with him.

“Fifty-Eight, Eighty-Seven, confine your search to that area,” the man continued. “Look for the possible ruin-based AR that Fifty-Eight reported. It might only be visible under specific conditions, so experiment. Place, time of day, gestures, and your gear’s data reception settings can all affect things. Report immediately if you spot anything else. Is that clear?”

“Eighty-Seven, roger.”

“Fifty-Eight, roger.”

Katsuya and Togami followed orders and kept looking for the girl, but without success. In the end, she was chalked up to a hardware malfunction or transmission error.

◆

What was all that, anyway? Katsuya wondered, recalling his experience in Kuzusuhara as he continued searching Higaraka. He still couldn’t make heads or tails of the encounter, and dwelling on it distracted him from the task at hand—a fact not lost on Airi.

“Katsuya, what’s on your mind?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing,” he replied. “Sorry. I’ll get my head back in the game.”

“I wonder.” Airi fixed Katsuya with an intent stare, born from her desire to know her crush better.

Such subtleties, however, were lost on Katsuya. And he worried what she would say if he told the truth, so he dodged the question. “Anyway, it’s about time we called it quits,” he said. “Let’s call Yumina and work out our next move. Yumina! Come on back!”

Airi recognized his evasion for what it was, but the forced smile on his face convinced her to let it slide. Katsuya had been suffering from bouts of gloom since their battle to defend Kugamayama City. As long as he was happy, she would not complain.

The young hunters gathered and checked the quantities of relics in each other’s backpacks. They all agreed that they were done hunting for the day, but they weren’t all equally happy about it. From the looks on Yumina and Airi’s faces, they felt the expedition had gone about as well as could be expected. Katsuya, however, wore a hint of a scowl.

“Tell me, how much do you think we’ll make on this haul?” he asked,

letting his disappointment show.

Airi gave the obvious answer: “Probably not much. Few of these relics rely on Old World tech.”

“Can’t argue with that.” Katsuya had already known the truth, but her dispassionate summary still stung.

“Don’t worry,” Yumina said, picking up on his dejection. “Elena promised not to mark us down for only finding low-value relics, remember? What matters is how we found them. They must have seen us at work, so don’t let it bother you.”

Elena had indeed observed the team’s performance. While they were making their way between buildings, she had kept an eye on them from a distance, checking with her sensors to see whether they spotted nearby monsters. When the young hunters entered a building to gather relics, she had come closer to monitor their actions through the walls. At one point, she had been so close that her eyes had met Yumina’s. Elena had put a finger to her lips, warning her not to say anything, and Yumina had complied with a smile and a nod.

Yumina believed that Elena had allowed herself to be spotted, and that keeping quiet was part of the test. So she spoke with conviction when she told Katsuya that Elena had been watching them, although she didn’t mention why she felt so confident. Katsuya believed her, but his dour look remained.

Once outside, the team made their way back to their starting point. Yumina and Airi picked their ways carefully through the ruins, determined not to let their guard down until the very end. A hunter’s work wasn’t done until she returned home safely, and a disaster now could spoil all the fruits of their labor.

Katsuya was equally committed to staying alert—but unconsciously he was also on the lookout for something to boost the disappointing results of their expedition. He knew that their haul of relics would be enough to earn Elena and Sara’s approval. And yet, something deep within him screamed that this wasn’t good enough. Merely ordinary strength wouldn’t keep him—or his comrades—alive in extraordinary circumstances. The thought—nearly an obsession—drove him to seek greater power and raised his attention to its limit.

That heightened concentration drew out Katsuya's latent talent, and he spotted an infinitesimal blip on his scanner's display. He adeptly toggled some settings to zoom in, getting a more detailed reading. He soon identified the anomaly.

"Yumina, Airi," he said, "check out that area for me."

Katsuya's teammates trained their own scanners on his discovery. Searching known coordinates didn't take long, so they soon found what they were looking for—a massive monster farther along the ruined street.

Yumina took a closer look at the behemoth through her scanner and grimaced. "That's a glutton croc, right? What's it doing here?"

Gluttonous crocodiles, or glutton crocs, were a highly diverse species of organic monsters. Most were reptilian, with a forked tail and powerful jaws—the latter lined with vicious teeth that could tear through anything. Apart from those basic traits, however, individuals varied so wildly that they could be mistaken for different species.

The secret lay in their freakish adaptability—a glutton croc's appearance reflected its diet. Consuming metal or ceramic gave them scales of the same material. Their hides could even reproduce the traits of other beasts they devoured. A crocodile that ate a robot armed with machine guns would sprout firearms from its back. One that ate a tank might sprout not only cannons and other armaments, but caterpillar treads as well. And the more they ate, the larger they grew. Most were small—about one meter from end to end—but those that survived long enough could mature into colossi hundreds of meters long.

"I've never heard of crocs living in Higaraka," Airi remarked, looking grim. "We've got to get out of here."

The creature they had spotted was the size of a large truck. Iron and concrete scales showed it had been feeding on the ruins themselves. It sported no guns, but it was still armed with an armor-tough hide, jaws that could rend metal, and the monstrous vitality common to all the deadly beasts of the wasteland.

The crocodile didn't seem to have spotted the young hunters, but they couldn't be too cautious. They took shelter behind a long-deserted house and watched it carefully.

The sudden, unexpected threat had shaken Yumina, but she relaxed once she realized it hadn't noticed them. "That was some impressive scouting,

Katsuya," she said, smiling at her team leader.

Airi nodded. "Amazing."

"Now, luckily, it's not blocking our route," Yumina continued. "Let's keep going and try to sneak past."

"We won't have a problem as long as we keep calm," Airi agreed. "Even if we encounter other monsters on our way back, it won't notice us as long as we dispatch them without a fuss. Let's go."

"Hang on," Katsuya interjected. His expression was deadly serious, and they stared at him, puzzled. "Yumina, Airi, let's take down that croc."

His words floored them. The suggestion hung in the air for a moment. Then Yumina retorted, "Are you completely out of your mind?!"

"I don't follow," Airi added.

They weren't just rejecting his idea—they looked at Katsuya like he was utterly mad. Even so, he forced himself to keep speaking. "It hasn't spotted us, so we can get the drop on it for sure. And it's out on the street, with no cover and no ranged weapons. We brought our best gear with us because we didn't know what kind of training to expect before we got here. So, we can unload on it with high-powered rifles while it tries to get close to us. We couldn't ask for better conditions. I think we can take it."

His appeal was earnest but not hopeful. He seemed to be asking, "Are we still doomed to fail, even with so much going for us?"

"I'm against it," Yumina said. She realized Katsuya had thought his proposal through, but that didn't change her mind. "This is a relic-hunting exercise, and making it back in one piece is part of our assignment. We have zero reasons to put ourselves in harm's way attacking a monster that doesn't even know we're here. And a glutton croc isn't something you take on just because you can. What's gotten into you, Katsuya?"

She spoke as firmly as possible, expecting Katsuya to double down. Even if Airi sided with him and majority rule forced Yumina to fight the beast, she at least wanted her harsh words to dispel any optimistic illusions.

But Katsuya didn't even ask for Airi's opinion. He dropped his eyes. "Oh. I guess I can't beat it, then." His gloom was back, growing stronger. When he looked up, he wore a forced smile. "Sorry. Forget I said anything. Let's go."

Yumina and Airi exchanged bemused looks, surprised by his lack of resistance.

In fact, Yumina wasn't as dead set against fighting the gluttonous crocodile as she had let on. Katsuya was right about their advantageous position, and taking down the behemoth would help to boost their hunter ranks. Moreover, Elena and Sara would probably step in to stop them from doing anything too reckless, so they could avoid a worst-case scenario.

Airi thought likewise. But her opinion made no difference, since Katsuya hadn't put his suggestion to a vote. So she looked at Yumina, imploring the other girl for a solution.

Yumina was soft on Katsuya, in part due to her feelings for him. She'd use her fists—and even her gun—to stop him from running off on a suicide mission, but his current plan didn't call for such drastic measures. And since Airi seemed to be in favor too, she settled on a compromise.

"Katsuya, wait." He turned a wondering face to her, and she responded with a conciliatory and rueful grin. "I'll go along with your plan, but on one condition: wait a sec while I check in with Elena. If she says no, give up. That goes for you too, Airi."

As she placed the call, Yumina noted surprise on Katsuya's face and a hint of pleasure on Airi's.

◆

Elena had been surveilling the area for threats, and her powerful sensors had detected the glutton croc before Katsuya had. But the beast was a fair distance away from the young hunters, didn't seem to have noticed them, and lacked ranged weaponry, so she decided it was safe to ignore. This was an exercise in hunting relics, not monsters.

Then she got the call from Yumina. The girl's proposal startled her, but she ended up agreeing to it.

"Are you sure about this?" Sara asked, taken aback. "I thought you weren't a fan of detouring to bag a monster or two just because a relic-hunting trip didn't pan out."

Elena had shot down many similar suggestions from Sara in the past. The truth was that Elena had acted out of concern for her partner. But if she'd admitted that, it could have inspired Sara to take even more risks; so instead she had argued that changing plans on a whim was a dangerous move in principle.

“I’m not, but I don’t want to force my ideas on other hunters,” she replied, in line with her previous excuses. “Druncam’s policy is to hunt whatever you can, and recording more monster kills will make it easier for those kids to land transportation security jobs.”

“Oh, I see.”

“That said, I would have marked them down big time if they’d gotten cocky and attacked that thing without contacting us—if they’d planned to take all the credit for killing it while counting on us to bail them out if they failed.”

Yumina had asked Elena and Sara to work with them to bring down the gluttonous crocodile. The rules for the training exercise said to act as though the instructors weren’t there, but she took this to mean only that she couldn’t count on them as teammates. There was nothing to stop her from requesting the assistance of skilled hunters she knew to be nearby. So Yumina had announced that her team would be launching an initial attack and asked Elena and Sara to join in as soon as possible. Their share of the profits would depend on how quickly they reached the combat zone.

As a matter of fact, Elena and Sara were close enough to join in immediately. Yumina had framed her proposal in those terms to gauge what the instructors thought of her and her teammates: If Elena and Sara joined in the attack immediately, that meant they considered the young hunters too inexperienced to fight without them. On the other hand, if they held back and pretended that they had been farther away, then the delay would be a compliment on the team’s ability. And rejecting the proposal outright would have meant that Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi were nowhere near ready to hunt a glutton croc. Elena had understood that when she gave her approval.

“And you don’t consider just asking a mark against them?” Sara asked, once Elena had brought her up to speed. “I hate to say it, but those kids are still treating us like bodyguards and counting on our help to bag that croc.”

“They promised other hunters a share of their profits, buying themselves insurance so they can fight safely even if they bite off more than they can chew. That’s being tough, not dependent. I approve.” Elena flashed a bold grin. “Of course, I’ll change my mind if they go back on their word and try to take full credit for the kill.” In that case, she would give the young hunters the worst evaluation possible. She assumed Yumina understood that, but as the team’s instructor, she was prepared to render harsh judgment

if necessary.

"All right, Sara, let's get in position," she continued. "I've got high hopes for what those kids can do, but be ready to blow away that monster the instant things get dicey."

"I don't know. Wouldn't a bit of a struggle be good training for them?" Sara countered. She figured that the young hunters would feel let down if she and Elena killed their target too easily.

"No holding back," Elena replied cheerfully. "We're all hunters, and they proposed a joint attack. We're under no obligation to leave them any more prey than we can help. Am I wrong?"

Sara laughed. "Well, I guess not. We'll leave it up to the kids' performance."

"That's more like it."

Elena and Sara were hunters in their own right, and they weren't going to hold back when there were profits to be earned.

With her augmented strength, Sara leaped onto the roof of a nearby building, where she staked out a sniper's perch that would keep the young hunters out of her line of fire. Then she lightly hefted a massive rifle that ordinarily required the strength of a powered suit just to lift. The high-explosive, armor-piercing shells in its magazine could punch straight through thick plating and blow up targets from the inside. If Elena's sensors had assessed their enemy correctly, one shot would be enough to end its existence. Sara already had the target in her sights—the only thing left to do was pull the trigger. She exhaled, holding herself steady, and gravely began to monitor the situation.

Elena used her scanners to keep tabs on the glutton croc while she steadied her sniper rifle. She had modified the weapon to work with her sensors, boosting its accuracy, and added custom parts to increase its raw stopping power. It took armor-piercing cartridges designed for maximum penetration—far less powerful than Sara's ammunition, but still quite deadly once Elena used her instruments to pinpoint her targets' brains and other vital organs. Elena also forwarded her data to Sara, dramatically increasing her partner's accuracy as well.

The pair were in position, ready to annihilate the crocodile at a moment's notice.

◆

The first thing Yumina did after ending her call to Elena was to let out her breath. She wouldn't have blamed her instructor for rejecting her proposal—it would have confirmed that their plan was foolhardy. But Elena had said yes. Yumina took that as a vote of confidence in their ability to kill the gluttonous crocodile without help. She steeled herself, took one deep breath, and exhaled, releasing her anxiety.

"I got approval," she said, smiling at her teammates. "Let's get that croc."

"Are you sure, Yumina?" Katsuya asked hesitantly.

"It's too late for second thoughts, Katsuya," she said, making a point to look annoyed. "I already told Elena we're doing this. If you want to call it off after that, tell her yourself."

That rekindled Katsuya's fighting spirit. "No, I'm in. Let's do this," he said, shaking off the gloom that his teammates had glimpsed on his face. "Thanks, Yumina."

"Just make sure you kill that thing and make this worth the trouble," Yumina grumbled, masking her embarrassment at his smile.

"I know. Airi, sorry for deciding this without you, but I want your help to bring that thing down."

"I'll try." Airi nodded, allowing a hint of enthusiasm to show through her usual deadpan expression.

"Great! Let's move!"

The young hunters smiled at each other, all brimming with determination as they took up their positions.

Chapter 35: The Power of Proprietary Ammo

Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi were ready to begin their assault on the gluttonous crocodile. With her quick thinking, Yumina had gotten the green light from their instructor, and their morale was high. Even so, the prospect of battling such a powerful monster unnerved them, and they couldn't pretend otherwise. Steadying their breathing, the young hunters focused, striving to be alert but not tense. Then they exchanged serious glances, making sure they were ready to open fire at the same moment.

While they could now count on Elena and Sara's support, they also had to dispatch their target as quickly as possible. A slow and steady battle would end with their instructors claiming the kill. So they planned to surprise the beast with the greatest burst of firepower they could muster and finish it off before Elena or Sara could intervene. They had already switched to their most powerful weapons and ammunition—now, they needed only to steel themselves and begin the operation.

Katsuya issued the order: "Get ready. Five. Four. Three..."

If their target fled, they stood almost no chance of catching it, so they hadn't bothered preparing for that scenario. They assumed rather that their enemy would charge straight at them, and they would focus their fire on its head when it did.

"Two. One..."

With their senses at maximum alertness, they steadied their limbs and placed tense fingers on their triggers. The wounded beast would probably fly at them in a rage; they would have to kill it before it reached them.

"Zero!"

Their weapons fired as one. Bullets crowded the air and struck the crocodile's head as the beast slowly dragged its bulk across the ground. Designed for bringing down big game, the projectiles shattered the tough scales on its face, flinging their fragments across the ground, and tore into

the flesh beneath.

But such injuries were little worse than scratches to the tenacious behemoth. Now alert, it turned and rushed straight at the young hunters with greater agility than its bulk would suggest, undaunted by their heavy fire.

Its charge was an awesome sight. Katsuya's team had expected it, even hoped for it, but their expressions still turned grim. Yet they never stopped firing. It was harder to hit a moving target, but the beast was too large to miss completely. The barrage of anti-monster bullets would have long since annihilated a lesser enemy.

But the crocodile didn't even flinch before the frontal assault. The stalwart creature forged ahead, even as bullets riddled its body, stripping away its hard scales and lodging in its exposed flesh. This crocodile had never developed ranged weaponry, instead fortifying its front side with thick plates to protect it until it could bite its foes. Chipping away at these defenses forced the young hunters to waste a lot of ammunition. Worse, their adversary barreled toward its prey so single-mindedly that it seemed to have forgotten the very concept of retreat. The bullets taking chunks out of its head didn't even slow it down.

As the gluttonous crocodile closed in, the trio began to look panicked. Despite their one-sided assault, they were far from having the upper hand. Katsuya gritted his teeth and kept firing. Yumina and Airi also gave their all. But nothing they did could halt the brute's advance.

This was their limit. They were fighting desperately, yet all their firepower only served to blunt the beast's assault. A sliver of doubt arose within Katsuya. His rational mind told him they could win—all they needed to do was maintain their barrage until their bullets stripped the crocodile's head bare of armor, and then focus their fire on its exposed vitals. But it also calculated that they couldn't pull it off in time. Elena and Sara would probably intervene before much longer, confirming that he was nothing special—only skilled enough to make trouble for them.

And despite his desperation to prove otherwise, Katsuya's instincts told him calmly that there was nothing more he could do to change that outcome. Again and again, he asked himself: Was he hopeless after all? Was this all he amounted to? Wasn't there any way to turn things around? And as the questions repeated in his mind, his doubt slowly but steadily grew.

If only he was stronger! Then he wouldn't have lost comrades defending the city. He could have saved more of them. He could have answered their frantic cries for rescue—so he firmly believed. That was why he sought the strength to answer those pleas: without it, he would be crushed beneath all the voices demanding his help.

In his state of heightened concentration, so intense that the world seemed to slow to a crawl, Katsuya suddenly remembered Akira.

If only I had his strength...

The strength to silence those who looked down on him and win their respect with a single demonstration. The strength to race off into certain death—and return alive. The strength to turn the tables without anyone else's help. Katsuya longed desperately for that strength, convinced that it would get him out of his predicament.

Damn it! I want strength like he has! And I don't care who or what it takes to get it!

Katsuya made a wish. He wished with all the focus his extraordinary talent granted him—an absolute clarity that purged all other thoughts from his mind and bleached the color from his world.

In that white realm, a girl was smiling.

An instant later, a bullet from Katsuya's heavy rifle hit the glutton croc. Normally, that would have done little to the mighty brute, but this bullet unerringly struck another projectile already lodged in the monster's head. The impact shattered both objects, like a shotgun blast fired from within the target's body. Shrapnel tore through the beast from the inside, striking and shattering other bullets in a chain reaction that shredded flesh and shattered bone. This single shot capitalized on every other bullet the young hunters had fired, causing maximal damage.

The crocodile still clung tenaciously to life. But the injury had thrown it off-balance and slowed its charge. Seizing the perfect opportunity, Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi unloaded all their remaining ammo into the beast's now-unprotected face. Before the brute finally breathed its last, the rain of fire had rendered its head almost unrecognizable.

The trio kept firing on the crocodile for a while longer, not realizing it was dead. When awareness of their victory did sink in, their rifles fell silent and their faces lit up.

"We did it!" Katsuya whooped. "We killed it! We won!"

Yumina let out a sigh, then grinned at his unabashed delight. “Well, that was kind of a close call,” she said, “but I’m glad we pulled it off.”

“Doesn’t matter. A win is a win,” Airi responded. For once, her look of proud joy was unmistakable.

Exchanging exultant looks, the young hunters celebrated their hard-won triumph.

◆

Elena and Sara didn’t quite agree on what to make of the battle they had just witnessed. While Sara happily praised the team’s performance, Elena looked puzzled.

“Is something bothering you?” Sara asked.

“A little,” Elena admitted. “Monsters that try to tough it out and charge you like that normally lose momentum gradually. So why did this one slow down all of a sudden like that?”

“Maybe they got lucky and hit a weak spot.”

“You think so?”

Elena doubted the monster would have charged its enemies head-on if it was vulnerable to attacks from the front. Still, glutton crocs came in all shapes and sizes, so she was willing to entertain the possibility. But even then, any flaw in the creature’s frontal armor would have to be minuscule—the thing couldn’t have survived long enough to reach that size if its weakness were easy to exploit.

So, had the crocodile just happened to have a weak point in the front? And Katsuya’s team had just happened to hit that tiny moving target dead-on? That was too much coincidence for Elena’s liking. But it wasn’t impossible, and the beast *was* dead. Supposing some other factor had taken chance out of the equation, she didn’t know what that could be. As an instructor, she would have to consider it a fluke. So she abandoned her speculation.

“Lucky, huh?” she mused. “Well, they do say luck is part of skill.”

Sara realized that her partner wasn’t voicing all her thoughts. “Don’t tell me you’re bummed out we didn’t get to bag that crocodile,” she teased.

“I won’t deny it. What hunter enjoys missing out on a kill?” Elena laughed and let the subject drop. “Now, let’s call it a day before we have

any more unplanned excitement."

The women met up with the young hunters, and the whole group returned together. Once they reached their cars, they wasted no time getting clear of the Higaraka Ruins.

◆

Akira left the ruined mansion feeling hopeful. He didn't know exactly what he'd found in the basement, but Alpha had made it sound impressive. And since this seemed as good a time as any to turn back, he mounted his motorcycle and made ready to leave the ancient residential district.

But Alpha soon took control of the bike and stopped him in his tracks.

What's up? he wondered. *I thought going home was your idea.*

Stay alert, Akira, Alpha said. *And get your CWH ready.*

Akira grimaced. If she was recommending the anti-materiel rifle, then he was about to fight something that demanded more firepower than his AAH could deliver. *So, what are we dealing with?*

Give me a moment, Alpha replied. *I can't track enemies using your scanner as easily as I can in Kuzusuhara. Stay put, just to be safe. Careless moves will make you easier to spot.*

Got it. He hushed his breathing, masking his presence like he used to in the back alleys, although he neither dismounted his bike nor lowered his rifle. Then he slowly surveyed his surroundings while he waited.

It was quiet. The air in the East always contained at least a trace of the colorless fog. Even when its effects were too slight to impair communications, it dampened sounds, preventing even the loudest from traveling as far as they normally would have. But Alpha still picked out the noise she was listening for.

Too bad. It spotted you, she announced. *I suppose we'll have to kill it.*

Kill what? Akira asked. *Whoa!*

The motorcycle suddenly shot forward. Alpha was driving, and Akira only escaped falling off because she also made his suit counteract the inertia.

Mere moments later, an artillery shell fell from the sky. It struck a house not far from Akira, bringing the crumbling structure a few steps closer to total disintegration.

Is that a monster shooting at us?! Akira demanded.

Exactly, Alpha replied. *We're going to get up close and take it out, so try to stay on your bike.*

Sure thing.

Akira raced through the ruins, gripping his CWH in his right hand and the handlebars in his left. The gaps between houses were easily wide enough to admit his motorcycle, although the debris-strewn ground would normally have slowed it to a crawl. Alpha's stellar driving technique brought the bike through the alleyways without incident—and without consideration for its rider's comfort.

She avoided a large pile of rubble in their path by ramping off smaller debris. Once the motorcycle was airborne, she tilted it ninety degrees to one side, planting both wheels on the wall, and kept driving.

Motorbikes are supposed to drive on the ground! Akira mentally shouted, his face taut with desperation.

But that's not all they can drive on, Alpha smugly responded.

Are you sure?!

I'm proving it right now, aren't I?

I guess you're right!

Even as the frantic conversation finished, the motorcycle was already back on the road. Maximum acceleration was too much to ask for, but they were still closing in on their target at a considerable speed.

All the while, the shelling continued. And not at random—it was clearly targeting Akira, however poorly. The enemy must have had something like a scanner of its own to track his position. But its attacks didn't faze him. After the cannon insects' downpour of shells, this didn't even qualify as a drizzle.

At last, he could see his enemy with his naked eyes—a gluttonous crocodile about twenty meters from end to end. The creature looked like an eight-legged lizard, coated in metallic scales and armed with a battery of back-mounted cannons. Its two tails were thick, long, and tough enough to demolish one of the houses in the ruin with a single sweep.

The crocodile had spotted Akira too. It swiveled its guns, trying to take aim at its approaching prey, but Akira was faster—he already had the beast in his CWH's sights. Even before he'd entered visual range, his Alpha-augmented vision had shown him his enemy clearly through all

obstructions. As he drew closer to his target, he'd increased his scanner's sensitivity, and Alpha had parsed the resulting data into a form he could see.

Then his CWH roared as it launched an armor-piercing projectile. While firing a heavy rifle that generated powerful recoil from a moving motorcycle would've been nearly impossible for most, Alpha's support made it a cinch for Akira. The bullet sped into the muzzle of one of the crocodile's guns, flew straight down the barrel, and ruptured the cannon's internal mechanisms.

The behemoth went berserk from the searing pain, pulverizing nearby houses with its powerful tails as it tried to pelt Akira with airborne rubble. Next came a direct shot from one of its surviving cannons, meant to finish the job.

Debris rained down around Akira. Even though it didn't hit him, it still littered the ground, creating obstacles and reducing his bike's mobility. And when the crocodile fired its back-mounted gun, the artillery shell tore through the air, leaving eddies in its wake, and blew away a house on impact.

But even that vicious assault came nowhere close to killing Akira. Alpha perfectly predicted the trajectory of the enemy fire and always kept him out of harm's way. The massive burst of debris was an open book to her: easy to dodge and, if Akira had to take a few hits, still better than a cannon blast. Even the rubble-strewn street posed no challenge to her optimized driving skills.

Through it all, Akira kept firing armor-piercing projectiles from his CWH, destroying a gun turret, tail, and leg. With Alpha helping him aim, he never missed a shot as he deftly hammered away at the crocodile's weapons and mobility.

Akira was pleased to discover that his CWH outperformed his wildest expectations, even if he needed Alpha's help to make the most of it. *This thing packs one hell of a punch!* he gushed. *I'm glad I bought it. I just wish I'd had it when we took on those cannon insects.*

You couldn't have, Alpha reminded him. *That job paid for it.*

I know, but still.

The better your gear, the easier a time you'll have taking out your enemies. Now that you've experienced that firsthand, get to work saving up for more upgrades.

You don't have to tell me twice.

Alpha gave Akira an alluring smile, and he grinned back.

The gluttonous crocodile was down to four legs, one tail, and one gun turret. It was losing this fight, and it knew it. The creature drained its own life force to sprout new legs, not even covered in scales yet, from its torn stumps. Then it fled, relying on sheer brawn to push through any rubble or structure in its path.

It ran? Akira asked, surprised. *I guess even monsters know when to quit.*

Animal or machine, they'll at least retreat temporarily if they sustain enough damage, Alpha informed him. *Not often, though—they usually kill or die before things get to that point. This just shows how much vigor that crocodile had to spare.*

Wow.

A fair number of monsters would indeed turn and run if they sensed they were at a disadvantage. Akira only found the idea strange because none of his attackers had ever done so—a fact he simply dismissed as more bad luck. He didn't think to reflect further, to draw deeper conclusions.

Well, individual differences do play a role, Alpha added, *and gluttonous crocodiles are particularly diverse. Maybe that one only learned to distance itself from enemies because it has ranged weaponry.*

Akira listened with interest, although he considered Alpha's explanation little more than trivia. It didn't occur to him that some of what she shared might be of vital importance.

So, what now? he asked. *Are we just gonna let it go? Personally, I'd like to finish it off and boost my hunter rank.*

Good idea, Alpha replied. *It shot first, so we have no reason to let it off easy. Let's chase it down.*

Great. Ready when you are.

The glutton croc had cleared a smooth path for them by shoving aside anything in its way. Akira rode after it at full throttle.

◆

Elena was on her way back to Kugamayama City when she remembered Akira. Perhaps he'd already left the Higaraka Ruins too, but she decided to let him know about the glutton crocs, just to be safe. The call went through

immediately.

"Hello, this is Akira."

"It's Elena," she said. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Oh. Sorry, but yes, I'm kind of in the middle of something," Akira replied. "Can it wait?" He sounded apologetic but not frantic—merely busy.

"Really? Sorry about that. It's nothing major. We ran into a monster called a gluttonous crocodile in the ruins, so I just wanted to let you know to watch out if you're still there."

"I understand," he said. "I'll be careful."

"If you run into one that you can't handle, try holing up in the big mansion at the heart of the ruins," Elena added. "That building's pretty tough. Once you're in there, either wait it out or call us for a rescue."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"Oh? Then I'll talk to you later. Take care."

Elena felt a little relieved as she ended the call. She'd been inexplicably concerned that Akira had run into a crocodile, but after hearing his tone, she decided she'd been worried for nothing. Either he hadn't met one or, if he had, it must have been weak enough for him to kill easily. Her fears allayed, she turned her attention elsewhere.

◆

Don't worry, I'll be fine, Akira answered Elena as he readied his CWH atop his moving motorcycle.

Oh? Then I'll talk to you later. Take care, she said.

That was the end of his telepathic call, which Alpha had routed through his data terminal.

Alpha, I just wanna double-check something, he said, a mirthless grin spreading across his grim face. *That thing counts as "one I can handle," right?*

Naturally. Alpha beamed confidently. *As long as you have my support, of course.*

Okay, then. Next! Akira fired his CWH. The armor-piercing bullet penetrated his enemy's hard scales, passed through its flesh, and flew out the other side.

But his target showed no signs of faltering.

Up ahead, a colossal, two-headed crocodile let out a wrathful growl.

A short time earlier, as the beast dashed headlong away from Akira, it stumbled upon the corpse of its relative that Katsuya's team had slain. Glutton crocs were freakishly adaptable, able to take on the traits of what they consumed—some of the time. In the case of humans, the crocodiles could digest their flesh but couldn't acquire their body parts.

On the other hand, members of their own species theoretically made ideal food. In practice, though, crocodiles did not engage in cannibalism. Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't even eat each other's corpses, since their bodies began to decompose soon after death. But here was a fresh kill. The fleeing crocodile had found the perfect meal, and it chowed down with gusto.

Its appearance changed immediately. The crocodile sprouted a second head, nourished by the flesh of its kin. Then it stopped running and turned to resume its assault on Akira.

Two maws gaped wide and then clamped down, trying to devour Akira along with the ground beneath him, while the powerful tail swept toward him, pulverizing buildings as it went. He dodged both with skillful driving. The beast got two mouths full of rubble and ground, while its tail left a swath of clear and level terrain.

Akira fired his CWH as he dodged through the onslaught. His bullets shredded one of his enemy's legs, pierced its body, blasted a hole through one of its mouths, and ripped tough scales from its heads.

Yet the crocodile lived. Its ruined leg immediately began to regrow, and the hole in its body soon stopped bleeding. Armed now with twofold strength and vitality, the monster overcame nearly fatal wounds to keep itself in fighting shape. And this time, it didn't flee the projectiles piercing its flesh—influenced by the other crocodile it had eaten, the creature tenaciously assailed Akira.

Alpha! he shouted, his face drawn. *Are you sure this is working?!*

Absolutely, she replied. *It's wearing itself out to heal those injuries. Just keep firing, and it will starve to death eventually.*

Did you say "starve"?

That's right. It's cannibalizing its own cells to regenerate, but at some

point that balance will collapse, and it will starve to death. Of course, it could always die of its injuries first.

Akira kept firing, although the idea of starving a beast by shooting it full of bullets seemed strange to him.

The glutton croc's second head served no purpose but to consume. Akira had already shot clean through it multiple times, but his attacks left no lasting damage. Immediate regeneration left only twisted scars where his bullet holes had been.

Meanwhile, the beast's other head was coated in so many layers of thick, tough scales that not even the armor-piercing ammo could penetrate it. Akira could shatter a few plates, but new scales quickly rose to take their place, leaving the crocodile's armor intact. Alpha's unerring marksmanship enabled him to land multiple shots on the same spot, but not even that had much effect.

It just keeps coming, Akira grumbled, looking fed up as he ejected another empty magazine from his CWH and tossed it aside. *Are you sure about this, Alpha? I know we'll win if we keep this up long enough, but what if I run out of ammo first?*

I don't think you need to worry about that, but I agree that drawing out the fight is a bad move, Alpha replied. *I suppose we'd better use our insurance.*

You think so? For a moment, Akira hesitated, until he remembered that he carried his "insurance" precisely for situations like this. He slotted his reserve magazine into his CWH.

His mind made up, he leaped off his motorcycle. With Alpha's help, he assumed a firing stance as soon as his feet touched the ground, gripping his anti-materiel rifle firmly in both hands and bracing his legs to absorb recoil. He set his sights on the head that contained the crocodile's brain. Then he pulled the trigger.

The rifle recoiled, kicking with too much force for even his powered suit to cancel out completely. He had used one of the CWH's proprietary cartridges. As long as he aimed true, this projectile could demolish a tank in a single shot.

The bullet struck the crocodile's head and immediately blew a massive hole in its target. Even his standard armor-piercing bullets could penetrate only the first layer of the beast's thick, scaly armor; but the proprietary ammunition punched straight through, blasting aside everything in its path. It plowed through the behemoth's body—leaving a tunnel so big that Akira could see out the other side—pierced a crumbling structure behind the beast, and kept going until it vanished into the ruins. That single shot had annihilated the glutton croc's brain.

The beast died instantly. Without a mind to command it, the hardy, regenerating body fell still. The impact of the shot had lifted its bulk slightly, and now the massive frame crumpled back to earth with a deafening crash.

Akira was almost stunned. *That's what proprietary ammo does? Talk about power. Now I see why those cartridges are so pricey that I can't even afford to test-fire one.*

They were supposed to be insurance against a real emergency. Alpha said. *I can't believe we already used one, especially considering what you paid for it.* Her smile suggested that she had a lot more to say on the topic.

Akira gave a strained grin. *Well, let's look on the bright side and call it money well spent.*

Akira had come to these ruins to practice using his scanner, but he had also signed up for a generic extermination gig while he was at it. Its terms were similar to a patrol, so he could recoup some of his ammo costs by claiming a reward for any monsters he killed. Even after using such a costly cartridge, he reckoned that killing the gargantuan crocodile would leave him in the black.

He got back on his motorcycle and drove straight out of the ruins. His foray into Higaraka had been full of surprises, but it was finally over.

Chapter 36: The Price of a Wish

Back at his hotel, Akira serviced his weapons while he and Alpha reviewed his experiences in Higaraka.

A gluttonous crocodile, like the one you ran into, is technically organic, she explained. *But they can make whatever they eat into part of themselves. I'm guessing the one you fought got its guns by eating a tank somewhere.*

"That's nuts," Akira said. "Even if it did eat a tank, growing a gun turret is pretty far-out."

Well, that's just how they work. Maybe their insides repair the weapons they ingest, or maybe they analyze and reconstruct them. Maybe each crocodile handles it differently. She added that crocodiles that fed on robots were often mistaken for a distinct species of mechanical monster.

That made sense to Akira—he had initially assumed he was dealing with a crocodile-shaped robot too. Then a sudden thought struck him. "You know a lot about monsters, Alpha," he said. "Do you have any idea why those things exist?"

I have some guesses, but a lot of it is based on information I haven't verified myself. Oh, and I can't tell you where I got my knowledge from, so don't ask—it could lead to trouble. She gave a knowing smile, and Akira forced himself to grin back.

"I get it. So, where did those crocs come from?"

They probably started out as lab animals that escaped and went feral.

In pursuit of advanced military cyborgs, Alpha explained, Old World researchers had sought to merge humans with machines that were almost alive—whose capacity for self-repair rendered maintenance obsolete—or with robots capable of servicing and manufacturing their own components. To make that dream a reality, they had developed nanomachines, testing their prototypes on reptiles. And for whatever reason—a simple accident, a military strike, or someone's idea of a joke—some of these test subjects had escaped their labs and adapted to life in the wild.

"I don't care why they did it—it's still a pain in the butt," Akira

grumbled, scowling. “What were those Old World people thinking?”

Alpha laughed. *Oh, I doubt their motives differed much from those of people living today. Their technology opened up so many possibilities that they couldn’t help wanting to experiment. That drive hasn’t changed, although the jury’s still out on whether your civilization will slip up and destroy itself like the Old World did.*

“You mean the society I’m living in could fall apart tomorrow if somebody somewhere screws up badly enough?”

Probably.

“Well, whatever brings all this crashing down, I hope it hangs together until I’m dead and gone.” He spoke dismissively: the end of the world seemed to him like someone else’s problem. His attention turned to more immediate concerns. “So, what was the deal with that woman in the mansion basement?”

That was basically a virtual temp agency, Alpha replied. *That room must have contained equipment for connecting to the Old Domain. And considering that it only worked when you stood in that one spot, I’d say that it was specialized for connection to a specific host.*

Akira looked puzzled. “What’s the point of sending out workers who aren’t really there?”

They can observe and answer questions—that’s good enough to do all sorts of jobs.

“Are you sure?” Akira still seemed unconvinced.

Absolutely. Alpha flashed a smug grin. *You’re looking at proof of it.*

“I can’t argue with that.” He nodded.

Others might have read a deeper significance into a system that dispatched a beautiful, if incorporeal, maid to a secret underground chamber. But Akira didn’t know enough to pick up on this, and Alpha hadn’t made a point of teaching him. Had he reacted favorably to the costume, perhaps she would have started dressing like a maid the next day, but he had dodged that bullet.

Just so we’re clear, Akira, she continued, *don’t tell anyone there’s a link to the Old Domain in that basement. And don’t take out the hardware to sell either.*

“Why not?” he wondered idly. “Wouldn’t I get a good price for an important Old World system like that?”

Out of the question! Alpha looked deadly serious.

The intensity of her response startled Akira, but he realized she must have a good reason. “All right. I’ll keep my mouth shut, and I won’t try to sell it. But at least tell me why.”

Old Domain access terminals are priceless relics. If you turn up with something that valuable, odds are good that someone will investigate where and how you found it. And if they realize you’re a User, you’ll be in grave danger.

“Is it really that big a deal?”

Yes. I kept you in the dark before because you ran less risk of discovery that way. But now that you know what you are, you absolutely must keep it a secret. If anyone finds out, your death won’t be pleasant.

From there, Alpha launched straight into a lecture on the uses and dangers of Akira’s ability. As he realized he might be kept alive as a guinea pig or dissected to study his brain after death, the blood drained from his face.

“To tell you the truth, I wish I didn’t know,” he said glumly. “Although maybe getting caught without knowing would’ve been even worse. No, scratch that—I still wish I didn’t know!”

You’d be surprised how easy it is to hide if you keep quiet, Alpha reassured him. *Some people even lie and pretend to be Old Domain Users. You’ll be fine with my support and a little caution.*

“Why would anyone lie about that?”

Those who can access the Old Domain often possess an exceptional aptitude for data processing as well. So talented hackers sometimes advertise their skills by claiming to be Users. Genuine Users keep it to themselves, of course.

Akira heaved an impressive sigh and let his head droop. For some moments he was visibly dejected. Then, abruptly, he jerked his head up. “Okay! I’ve decided: I got lucky! If I wasn’t a User, I wouldn’t have met you, so I’d be dead already!” He was shouting, mostly to convince himself and to shake off his funk. It wasn’t the most convincing argument, but his bluster made up for it.

I’m glad that you’ve gotten over your shock, Akira. Alpha grinned. *But keep your voice down. You’re in the clear this time, but watch out—you’d be in deep trouble if someone overheard you.*

“Th-That was a close one,” Akira murmured, snapping back to reality. “A-Are you sure no one heard me?”

Don’t worry. No one is close enough to hear you, and this room isn’t bugged. I did a thorough scan for both. Akira let out a sigh of relief, and Alpha smiled, satisfied that he appreciated the gravity of his situation. *Now, that’s enough doom and gloom. Let me tell you what we got out of this trip.*

She explained again that the maid Akira had seen came from a temp agency for virtual entities. The Old World corporation that ran the service displayed her via the Old Domain—which meant the ancient facilities it linked to were still operational. Such active connections offered access to an immense wealth of Old World knowledge, technology, and goods. And so any means of accessing the Old Domain was worth a fortune in the East. Both governing corporations and the Hunter Office would pay an exorbitant price for one.

Akira understood the value of the find, but he failed to see how it benefited him directly. “I get that it’s a big discovery,” he said, “but what good does it do us? I can’t sell the hardware or info on where it is because that would give away that I’m a User, right?”

There are plenty of other ways to turn it to your advantage, Alpha replied. *I traced the connection to Lion’s Tail, Inc. Although it’s an Old World corporation, some of its facilities still seem to be up and running. Lion’s Tail apparently did business through access terminals installed all over the map, and I managed to locate all of them, along with the company’s branch offices.*

“I get it. So, we’re gonna go there and look for relics?” Akira beamed. At last, this was a benefit he could understand.

Exactly. Naturally, all these locations are in ruins of the Old World. And if any of them haven’t been discovered by other hunters yet, they should be loaded with relics.

Not long ago, many hunters had leaped at rumors of an uncharted area and the treasures it contained. Those reports had been false—but Akira had just stumbled upon the real thing. And not just an area—an entire ruin.

“What are we waiting for?!” he shouted in spite of himself. “Let’s go!”

Not yet, Alpha gently admonished him. *Wait until you at least have a car that can handle the wasteland. I don’t trust that motorcycle for what could turn out to be a long trip, and you’d have a hard time lugging a trove of*

relics back on it, anyway.

"So I'll have to be patient, huh? Well, I feel more motivated when I've got a clear goal, so I guess I'll focus on earning what I need to get there." Akira continued servicing his gear with a touch more diligence, elated at the prospect of discovering an untouched ruin. If all went according to plan, its wealth of relics would be his for the taking. "By the way, what happened to my reconnaissance practice?" he asked, turning to the next topic he was wondering about. "I don't remember you giving me any feedback about my performance."

In summary, you were hopeless.

"Oh. Okay."

Don't let it bother you. Our primary goal today was for me to confirm what your scanner is capable of. And thanks to everything that happened, I got all the data I needed.

"Well, if you say so."

That reminds me: this scanner still has data from when Elena used it.

"What kind of data?"

All kinds. Internal layouts of ruins near Kugamayama City, analyses of monsters, and so on. I also found data recorded with other scanners, plus some used to tune this one's individual functions, so I'm guessing that Elena experimented with it as thoroughly as she could. But you won't need that junk with me around, so I'll just delete it.

"Really? I'm out of my depth here, so it's your call."

Would you like to look it over before I wipe it all?

"Hmm? Sure, why not?"

All right, then.

Akira expected her to produce more augmented-reality monsters. He froze, shocked, when nude images of Elena and Sara appeared instead.

Elena was not so much slender as svelte. Every unnecessary element had been wrung out of her body, leaving only compact essentials. Her litheness accentuated the color and sheen of her healthy skin, allowing simple elegance and sensual allure to coexist without conflict.

Sara, for her part, bore a beautiful, full bosom—clearly irresistible on its own, yet enhanced by her supple skin, the eurythmic curves of her waist and hips, and the play of shadow across her cleavage.

Both naked bodies were different, yet equally captivating. And Elena

and Sara flaunted every bit of them, their enchanting smiles reflecting their respective personalities to Akira.

The sight of his saviors fully exposed stunned Akira even as it fascinated him. But as soon as he returned to his senses, he cried, “Hold on! Alpha! What’s the big idea?!”

What do you mean? Alpha asked. *I just displayed the leftover data for you. Of course, you wouldn’t understand the raw numbers, so I ran them through the same visual rendering I use on my own appearance.*

“Wh-Why are they naked?!”

Don’t ask me. Maybe they were naked when Elena recorded this, or maybe their clothes are stored separately to avoid duplicating data.

“J-Just make them go away!”

Elena and Sara vanished from Akira’s view.

I don’t see what you’re so flustered about, Alpha remarked from beside him, looking puzzled. *I seem to recall you saying that you’d gotten used to that sort of thing. But perhaps I misremembered.*

“It depends on who and where!” Akira glared reproachfully at her while he held a hand to his blushing face.

Is that how it works?

“Yes!”

Akira sighed deeply and went back to his maintenance routine, but he couldn’t get the image of Elena and Sara out of his head. He was too busy trying to dislodge the memory to get any work done. And Alpha painstakingly studied his struggle.

◆

Elena and Sara were back at home after a day of work in the ruins. But their job wasn’t over yet, and it wouldn’t be until they sent Druncam their report on the young hunters’ training. So, Elena was in her study, composing the document on her head-mounted terminal.

She had taken a quick dip in the bathtub to freshen up, meaning she was undressed as usual. Then Sara entered, wearing more than her partner, but still exposing enough that Akira would have found it extremely difficult not to stare. The pair had been similarly unclad when Elena had tested her old scanner out around their home, which was why they appeared naked in its forgotten data.

Writing reports was Elena’s job. Sara could do it in a pinch, but Elena

produced better results, choosing her words carefully to manage their relationship with Druncam. So Sara refrained from complaining about Elena's lack of clothes as she handed her partner a drink.

"Thanks," Elena responded.

"How's the report coming along?" Sara asked.

"Hm? I'm working on talking up the kids without crossing the line into flattery." Elena chuckled as she recalled the terms of their contract. "Druncam's young hunters don't have the best reputation in some quarters. I don't know if the syndicate wanted a good word from outsiders to turn that around, but I'd say Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi earned it—especially after they took out that croc on their own."

"If you say so." Sara left all such judgments to Elena, so she didn't care how her partner chose to dress up the team's performance. Her thoughts turned elsewhere. "That reminds me, Elena: didn't you speculate that Druncam offered us this job as part of a move to recruit us?"

"Yes, although I might just have been overthinking it. Druncam seems to be in the market for instructors to train up its rookie hunters, though, so it's a real possibility. That could also explain why they've hired us to work with Katsuya's team so many times in the past."

"That recruitment offer, huh?" Sara mused. "We haven't given them a definite answer yet. What's our next move?"

"Let's take our time and think it over carefully. If we join, I doubt we'll be able to leave easily. Druncam isn't rushing our decision because they understand that too." The syndicate had offered them decent terms but not outstanding ones, so Elena preferred to proceed with caution. "What do you think, Sara? I'd be more inclined to consider it if you were interested."

"To be honest, I'm on the fence. What about you?"

"It's a mixed bag. Joining Druncam would help us out in a lot of ways. We could work more safely and probably get a better selection of gear too. I bet they'd even chip in if we ever struggled to pay your nanomachine bills again."

"You've got me there," Sara admitted with a slight, rueful grin.

"But we'd also lose the freedom we have now. Druncam might force us to take jobs we're not interested in, and internal politics would tie us down."

Sara's nanomachine supply kept her alive, so the women generally

welcomed any assistance maintaining it. But they had to consider the risks of placing her survival in Druncam's hands. The syndicate could easily saddle them with especially restrictive contracts in exchange for that extra support.

For better and for worse, Elena and Sara were used to working as a pair. As hunters, they were used to living free, and they wouldn't take the loss of that freedom lightly. Sara valued her life, but she didn't want to make things harder on her closest friend because of it.

"Sorry to basically dump the decision on you," Elena said, with a tender smile at her worried partner. "But I think you have more riding on this than I do, so I want you to choose. Thankfully, you've got plenty of time to consider. I won't complain either way."

"Thanks, Elena. I'll take my time." Sara smiled back, touched by her old friend's kindness.

◆

Once Katsuya returned to Druncam headquarters, he took only a short break before heading off to practice at the indoor firing range. The weapons stored at the range were modified for indoor training—they couldn't fire live ammo, but that was no drawback, since they perfectly simulated recoil. And while the targets were also virtual, precise trajectory calculations allowed them to accurately detect hits even when the distance was set to several kilometers. Training in such a simulation gave Druncam hunters free rein to experiment with ammunition too costly to waste in live-fire exercises.

Katsuya believed that he had gained something new at the moment he killed the crocodile, and he attributed the discovery to his heightened concentration. So he fired over and over again, determined to master the trick before he forgot it.

He landed one hit, then another and another, pulling off a string of tricky shots. Surprise and pleasure brought a smile to his face.

Yumina and Airi came looking for him. They had already changed into casual wear and wondered what was taking him so long. Yumina's expression darkened when she caught sight of him. She guessed he had been training nonstop since their return, and she worried he was pushing

himself too hard again. But she relaxed when she noticed the look of lively delight on his face.

"Katsuya," she called, schooling her expression into a reproving frown, "how long are you going to keep that up?"

"Oh, sorry," he replied. "Is it time already? I was really in the zone, so I've been trying to get a handle on the feeling while it lasts."

"Let me see," Airi cut in, impressed by his display of confidence.

"Sure thing." With perfect self-assurance, Katsuya raised his rifle, took steady aim, and pulled the trigger. But his shot went wide of the distant target, giving no sign of his earlier performance.

"Huh? Hang on. One more try." Once again, he aimed and missed.

"Gimme a sec. I'll land the next one." He missed the shot, then another and another. He felt no different than he had during his string of hits moments ago, but he couldn't manage even one. Katsuya was understandably confused. But after spotting the bemused look on Airi's face, he hurriedly said, "It's not what you think! I really was in the zone until just now!"

"I believe you," Airi responded.

"No one's calling you a liar. We believe you, and the record backs you up," Yumina added, pointing to the screen displaying his results.

"O-Oh, right." Reassured, Katsuya regained his composure.

"Anyway, you've been doing too much shooting," Yumina continued. "You've barely taken any time to rest since we got back. If you keep this up, you'll wear yourself out—maybe that's even why you missed. Why don't you call it a day already?"

Katsuya hesitated. She might be right about fatigue throwing off his aim. "No, let me keep trying a little while longer. I don't wanna end on a missed shot." He resumed firing, but without landing a single hit.

"See you later, then," Yumina said, sighing. "Everyone's waiting for you, so don't get stubborn and drag this out too long."

"Okay, I'll be there."

Yumina left with Airi, making a mental note to put on her powered suit and drag him home the next time he kept her waiting.

Katsuya took aim at his target once more and immediately scored a clean hit. He was about to chase after his teammates, but changed his mind and raised his rifle again. Just one more shot wouldn't hurt. He would stop

after this one, even if he missed.

In fact, he planned to call it a day after that. But his next shot hit too, so he took another. The same thing happened again. And again. Suddenly, he was back in top form, landing hit after hit after hit.

“What in the world...?” he muttered, baffled by his own success. But he didn’t want to keep Yumina and Airi waiting, so he ended his training session and left the firing range.

◆

Katsuya’s wish to bring down a gluttonous crocodile on his own had come true. He had turned the tables and broken through the obstacle in his path with his own strength, not relying on his teammates’ help.

But every wish has a price, even if the person making it is none the wiser. And while Katsuya had gotten his desire, he had yet to pay for it.

In a white void, a girl was smiling.

Chapter 37: Helping Out at the Temporary Base

Several days after their expedition to the Higaraka Ruins, Katsuya's team assembled in a room at Druncam headquarters on the orders of an executive named Arabe. Beside him sat Mizuha, an administrator whose neat business suit made her look out of place in the ranks of a rough-and-tumble hunter syndicate. The young hunters gave her curious looks, but all three hurriedly straightened up once Arabe spoke.

"Now, as I informed you earlier, I've called you here to discuss the results of your recent training exercise. I apologize for the delay: Elena submitted your evaluations promptly, but verifying it and building a consensus within Druncam took up time."

After that brief preamble, he got straight to the point. "I have several things to tell you, but I might as well start with the news I'm sure you're dying to hear. Following close scrutiny of the report and careful deliberations, the syndicate has decided that you no longer require a supervisor. Congratulations: you're now full-fledged Druncam hunters!"

Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi exchanged looks, openly delighted that their days of second-class treatment were now behind them.

"Now, I'd like you to tell me something," Arabe continued in a harsher tone, raining on their parade. "What kind of stunt did you pull?"

"Um... What do you mean, sir?" Katsuya asked hesitantly.

"You genuinely have no idea what I'm talking about?" Arabe fixed him with an admonishing stare. Katsuya wondered what he could have done wrong, though he had a guess. The executive read his face. "Well, I mostly meant to rattle you and see what I could find out. Judging by your attitude, however, I'd say you have some idea."

Katsuya's sudden look of dismay confirmed Arabe's suspicions.

"This should go without saying, but I'll spell it out, just to be clear," he continued. "I've read the report thoroughly. Now, I'll ask you again: what

kind of stunt did you pull?"

Katsuya panicked, unsure what to say. Seeing how flustered he was, Yumina sighed and answered in his place. "Katsuya made an easily misinterpreted statement to Elena before our training exercise. We didn't consider it worth reporting because we resolved the misunderstanding so quickly, but I apologize if it caused any difficulties."

"I...I'm sorry, sir," Katsuya added without protest.

Arabe surveyed the trio once more and decided that they were telling the truth. Calming down, he said, "Even if you're on friendly terms with them, they're still unaffiliated hunters. Remember that you're a member of Druncam and mind your manners from now on."

"Y-Yes, sir. I'll be careful," Katsuya responded. To his relief, Arabe didn't seem inclined to demote him back to rookie status.

"Moving on," the executive continued, "because you were assigned to Shikarabe, you've effectively been under my jurisdiction. But as of today, I'm transferring you to Mizuha's command."

Guided by a gesture from Arabe, the young hunters turned to look at their new manager.

"Nice to meet you," she said pleasantly. "I'm Mizuha."

"That about covers it," Arabe added. "From now on, all your paperwork and so on will go through her. There's a little more you ought to know, but I'd prefer you ask Mizuha and get to know your new boss in the process, so I'll take my leave now. See you round. Mizuha, I hope you don't mind taking things from here."

"Not at all," she replied.

Arabe left the room, leaving Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi startled by the sudden turn of events.

◆

Arabe walked along a corridor, looking vaguely forbidding as he recalled the conversation.

Did they really not do anything wrong, or are they too stupid to even realize they screwed up?

Elena's report demonstrated that the young hunters were perfectly competent. She had praised the way they'd handled the crocodile, and she

hadn't even mentioned Katsuya's remark. But she had also sent a polite refusal of Druncam's recruitment offer.

Of course, Elena hadn't shared their most important reasons for declining Druncam. Focusing on monster hunting would put a heavier burden on Sara, who was the team's muscle. Sara realized this but had asked Elena not to decline the offer on those grounds, and had left the decision up to her friend. And Elena had ended up sending a formal refusal because she didn't want to overwork Sara anyway.

But revealing too much would only allow the syndicate to gain a hold over them. So Elena had written that Druncam's greater emphasis on monster hunting didn't mesh with her and Sara's priorities, citing Katsuya's team's attack on the crocodile as an example. It was an excuse but not a lie—Elena and Sara had always made relic hunting their focus.

So Druncam only knew that Elena and Sara had turned them down after observing Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi's behavior. And all the time Arabe had spent listening to Shikarabe gripe about his charges had prejudiced Arabe against the young team. Even now, he couldn't help speculating along these lines.

Katsuya's team really pushed the envelope when they risked attacking that croc. Maybe Elena took issue with that too. Maybe she only put a positive spin on it in her report for our benefit, because the kids managed to kill it on their own. I hope not, but you never know.

Arabe sighed and shook his head. "Well, either way, they're not my problem anymore." He chuckled. The desk jockeys had forced Arabe to oversee the syndicate's young hunters—Katsuya's team included. Now that they were out of his hair, he felt more relaxed and looked forward to Shikarabe becoming a little less grumpy. "You guys let the kids get full of themselves, so you can deal with them now."

◆

Back in the room, Mizuha was gushing over the young hunters. "I read the report too, and your results just blew me away. I mean, skilled relic hunters *and* tough enough to take down a glutton croc with just the three of you? I'm really impressed."

"Th-Thank you very much." Katsuya was unsure how to take this kind

of praise. Most adults in Druncam looked down on him and gave him the cold shoulder. But his delight at finally getting some recognition won out over his confusion, so he bashfully accepted the compliment.

"I've gotten so many complaints for supporting young hunters, you know. People are always calling it a waste of money," Mizuha continued, a bit frustrated. Then she suddenly beamed. "But *you* got results. You kept trying no matter what anyone said about you, and you were right to. You proved that supporting the people who will build Druncam's future was the right call. I can't thank you enough."

"N-No, we should be thanking you," Katsuya replied. Mizuha's logic was questionable—it boiled down to "You were justified, so I was too"—but her praise had left him too relaxed to notice.

Mizuha went on, "You're under my command now, but don't worry—as long as you stick with me, you'll get the generous benefits you deserve." But not with anyone else, she silently implied. She made clear where they stood and who they worked for even as she buttered them up. "I can send plenty of municipal jobs your way. In fact, I have an impressive selection all lined up. The dossier is right here, so I'll cut to the chase and explain—"

Suddenly Katsuya snapped back to his senses. "P-Please wait a second," he hastily interjected.

Mizuha gave him a confident smile. "What is it? If you don't understand something, feel free to ask me anytime. I'll answer any question you have." A seemingly kind offer, but it would also limit his sources of information to herself.

"No, I was just thinking that, since we're allowed to take our own jobs now, I'd like to handle that side of things ourselves."

"Of course you would. I have plenty of offers on hand, so choose any one you like. I'll fill you in on all the details." Mizuha laid out files on potential jobs for Katsuya's inspection. He was free to "choose," all right—from the selection she'd prepared for him. Then, determined to sweep him along and keep him from searching for his own opportunities, she forged ahead. "I'll start with this one. It's quite a challenging assignment, involving the construction of a temporary base. But I know you three have the skills to..."

While Katsuya felt somewhat overwhelmed as he listened, Yumina and Airi mentally stepped back and took stock of the situation. Mizuha was

obviously trying to win them over, but what she offered would definitely benefit Katsuya. And her respect for their ability was genuine. The two girls exchanged a surreptitious glance. They had their reservations, but Mizuha was their boss, her terms were good, and she didn't seem to be out to fool them. So they hesitated, each knowing that the other girl was thinking the same thing.

Katsuya listened, agonizing over the choice of jobs. He couldn't bring himself to reject a well-meaning offer from someone who thought so highly of his team. And Mizuha, who had researched his personality ahead of time, was well aware of that fact. But she wasn't lying, and she had no intention of deceiving him. She believed that this arrangement would be mutually beneficial—that it was *right*.

◆

One day, some time after Akira had battled the crocodile in Higaraka, he boarded a large bus bound from Kugamayama City to the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. With him were a number of hunters who had signed on to help construct a new temporary base, and they ranged from run-of-the-mill rookies to heavily armed veterans.

The city's management wanted to establish a forward base to speed up the conquest of Kuzusuhara. They would start with a temporary camp in the desert near the outskirts, then build lines of communication toward the ruin's heart. While the base was under construction, heavy machinery would clear rubble from the roads that led deeper in, smoothing the way for tanks, transports, armored vehicles, and mechs. These would make it far easier to exterminate the powerful monsters that lurked deep within the ruin and to extract relics difficult to move on foot.

Plundering deeper into Kuzusuhara would bring immense wealth to the city. All of this work, including Akira's job, was laying the groundwork for those profits.

Akira was supposed to provide "construction assistance," but his hunter rank didn't qualify him to help with anything the city preferred to keep private. So he was relegated to the rather banal work of securing the site and guarding the actual construction workers.

Upon arriving at the construction site, he and the other hunters got a

basic rundown of their jobs. An official representing their client, the city, then divvied up tasks to them based on their individual preferences and ability. Next he loaned them data terminals while another employee launched into an explanation.

"You'll receive orders from us on those terminals. They double as communicators, and you can use their built-in maps to locate yourself and your colleagues. Be careful not to confuse a fellow hunter for a monster and shoot them by mistake." Then came a word of warning: "And don't go poking around for relics just because you're in the ruins. We didn't hire you for that kind of hunting, and we don't want you wasting your energy on it. Remember that we know where you are and what you're doing at all times. Don't linger too long in one place or do anything else that could lead to a misunderstanding. Is that clear?"

The first official handed Akira his terminal—a mass-produced model, built tough for wasteland use.

"Your terminal has a number on the back. That number is what we'll call you. End of explanation. As soon as you're ready, head into the ruins and follow your map's navigation."

Akira flipped his device over and pulled a face.

You can't seem to get away from that number, Alpha remarked, with a strained grin.

I guess not, Akira ruefully admitted.

Written on a piece of tape stuck to the back of his terminal was the number fourteen.

Akira left the base and followed his terminal's directions into the ruins. The device led him to the entrances of one of the area's many crumbling skyscrapers, where he received a call. He answered it with a few taps on the loaned device and heard an official say, "This is sector A-2 headquarters. Fourteen, do you read me?"

"This is Fourteen. Loud and clear," Akira replied.

"Secure the building in front of you and map its interior. The terminal we loaned you has built-in automapping, so all you need to do is enter each room and wait a little while. Enter every room and eliminate any monsters you come across. This will help to establish a safe zone around the base."

"What if I run into something I don't think I can handle alone?"

“Contact us; we’ll send reinforcements. Any other questions? If not, get started.”

“Roger that. I’ll get right to it.”

“Good luck. HQ out.” The call ended.

Akira steeled himself. But before he could enter the building, Alpha intervened. *Wait a sec. You might as well get in some scouting practice while we’re here.*

Won’t that make this take longer? Akira asked.

Not if you work quickly without sacrificing caution. You’ll need those skills to survive if the colorless fog rolls in. Pretend that your scanner and I are both suffering from reduced sensitivity and stay on the alert to compensate.

The colorless fog, huh? Akira was still green, and he found forgoing help from Alpha or his scanner to be a nightmare scenario. Nevertheless, he psyched himself up and wiped the unconscious scowl from his face. *Got it. Point out what I do wrong.*

Akira raised his rifle and carefully entered the building. Clear patches on the dirt-strewn floor showed where explorers, inhuman residents, or both had recently disturbed the dust. Collapsed walls and scattered debris testified to past battles. Akira moved slowly through it all, taking care to walk silently and keeping a wary eye on his surroundings. Suddenly, he stopped to listen and then burst into a room, his weapon at the ready.

He scouted the building as painstakingly as he would have if it were crawling with monsters. All the while, Alpha gave him regular critiques on his performance, slowly but steadily refining his skills. By the time he finished his sweep of the first floor, he had spent far more time, and felt far more tired, than he would have exploring normally.

Not that I’m surprised, but this takes a while, he said. *No wonder they warned us not to hunt relics.*

Safe, efficient scouting is a vital hunting skill, Alpha responded. *But practice makes perfect, so you’ll just need to keep at it. Keep an eye out for camouflaged monsters, in particular.*

Akira grimaced. *You don’t have to tell me that. I almost died the last time.* Ignoring Alpha’s instructions in Kuzusuhara had once put Akira in the path of a massive robot hidden by active camouflage. The advanced stealth system had gone far beyond simply mimicking its surroundings, rendering

the mechanical colossus completely invisible to him. *But how is working on my scouting skills gonna help me against things I can't see?*

In all sorts of ways. You could look for slight discrepancies with nearby scenery or analyze sounds and vibrations, for example. High-end scanners and scouting specialists are quite capable of finding them.

Fancy sensors and specialists, huh? You know, that sounds like Elena. Think she could have spotted that big robot?

Probably. Taking Elena and Sara as an example, Alpha launched into a more detailed explanation. The two hunters divided their responsibilities—Elena identified targets while Sara supplied the firepower. Both were important roles, but if it came to a choice, scouting was more critical. The power to detect threats was an invaluable asset to any relic hunter, allowing them to avoid unnecessary conflict, prevent ambushes, get the drop on their targets, and explore ruins in greater safety than toting an oversized gun could provide. And if either Elena or Sara became incapacitated while they were deep in some ruin, they would have better odds of survival if their scout were the one still standing—it would take more than firepower to ensure they made it back in one piece.

Akira saw Alpha's point, since he owed more than a few safe returns to his partner's exceptional reconnaissance. *Elena sure is something*, he said.

And even she has a much harder time spotting anything when the colorless fog gets too dense, Alpha reminded him. *It tanks the performance of all her sensors.*

Akira recalled the time he'd rescued Elena and Sara. The colorless fog had decided that battle. Alpha's support had mostly spared him from its influence and allowed him to pinpoint the attackers. The men, on the other hand, couldn't locate Akira in the fog or offer any resistance as he picked them off.

That fog is bad news, he said. *Isn't there something we can do about it?*

Your only options are to buy a scanner so powerful it can stand up to the fog or to learn how to scout without relying on instruments, Alpha replied. *So, get back to work!*

I'm on it. Next up, the second floor. How many floors does this building have, anyway?

Eight.

All that trouble clearing one floor, and he had seven more to go. *Guess*

I'm in this for the long haul, Akira muttered, sighing, as he climbed the stairs.

After roughly two hours, Akira had secured every room on every floor. He had just emerged onto the roof, looking exhausted, when he got another call on his work terminal.

"This is sector A-2 headquarters. Fourteen, do you read me? What's your situation?"

"This is Fourteen. I just finished securing this building," he replied.

"Roger that. Follow your navigation to the next one. Also, you took considerably longer to clear that building than we estimated. Did you encounter powerful monsters or any other unforeseen difficulties?"

"No, I didn't run into anything hostile. I think carefully and cautiously going over every room just ate up time." Akira paused. "How long did you expect this to take me?"

"We estimated approximately one hour. I can't tell you to be reckless, but try to hurry up a bit. Over."

"Roger that," Akira responded glumly, then ended the call. The reminder that he wasn't up to scratch weighed on him.

Don't let it get to you, Alpha piped up, smiling encouragingly. *Let's keep up this pace. No need to rush and put yourself in more danger.*

But what if they decide I failed the job? he argued.

Let them. That's nothing compared to an injury that might cause problems down the road. Your safety is my top priority. So I'll stop you from working faster than you're ready to—by force if necessary. Alpha's tone brooked no argument.

Okay, Akira said, relieved. *You're right. Let's play it safe.*

That's the spirit. But learning to work quickly is still an important part of improving your stealth and recon skills, so I'll still be pushing you to speed up.

Go easy on me. Akira gave a pleading grin in response to Alpha's bold one.

No, I won't cut you any slack.

They shared a chuckle. Freshly motivated, Akira set off for the next building.

After securing several more long-abandoned skyscrapers, his terminal's

navigation pointed him back to the temporary base. Once there, he returned the device to an official, marking the end of his day's labor. His fatigue overpowered his sense of accomplishment.

That's it for today. I'm beat. He sighed, trying to exhale his exhaustion. His powered suit couldn't spare him from mental exertion, so unaided reconnaissance had been a draining experience—all the more so because he usually left it to Alpha.

Good work, Alpha said cheerfully. *Let's take a breather before we head home. Why not grab a bite to eat here while you're at it? You've only got the same old frozen stuff to look forward to back at the hotel.*

A number of trucks were parked around the base, housing mobile storefronts that catered to the construction workers. Some sold weapons and ammunition; others offered simple dining. Campers even served as low-end hotels. The businesses appeared to be doing a fairly brisk trade. A bus ran between the base and Kugamayama at regular intervals, but plenty of people didn't want to bother making the trip every time they needed to grab a snack or resupply. So although the trucks charged inflated "wasteland rates," they had no shortage of customers.

Some of the food trucks sold soft, hot meals—a welcome change from the tough, portable rations that hunters carried with them. Real food was a treat after a death-defying day in the ruins, so the hired guards were willing to pay a premium for the luxury. Akira saw other hunters chowing down and suddenly realized that he was starving.

Good idea, he said. *I'll get something to eat too.*

He surveyed the various food stands, thinking that if he were going to buy dinner, he might as well pick something good. But he couldn't tell if he would like the fare just by looking, and something told him trusting his luck would turn out badly. In the end, he relied on popular opinion. None of the trucks had remarkably long lines, but some were busier than others, and he queued up for one of these.

While he waited, he checked the truck's sign and saw that it offered hot sandwiches for 980 aurum apiece. Akira hesitated to spend that much on a single meal, on account of both the inflated price and the state of his bank account. But he didn't want to give up after waiting in line so long either, so he decided to go through with it.

As Akira's turn to order approached, he overheard a customer ahead of

him talking with the staff. One of the voices seemed familiar, but try as he might, he couldn't place it until he reached the head of the line. Sheryl was manning the window.

After a fleeting look of surprise, she smiled and said, "Welcome. One order costs 980 aurum."

"I'll take one," Akira responded.

"Coming right up. If you wish to pay by card, please use this reader." Sheryl pointed to a device on the counter. A digital display above it read, "980 aurum."

Akira waved his hunter ID over the reader, which beeped and completed the transaction. He then received his hot sandwich. Out here in the desert, away from the city's security, this food truck delivered orders only after receiving payment.

As Sheryl handed Akira his paper-wrapped meal, she leaned in close to him and whispered joyfully, "I'm so glad I ran into you here." Immediately, she reverted to her earlier tone and gave Akira the same smile as any other customer. "Thank you for your purchase. Please come again."

Akira took his food and left the line. Then it finally hit him that this food stall was operating out of Katsuragi's truck. The merchant, who was running his own shop, noticed him at almost the same time.

"That you, Akira?" Katsuragi said. "So, you're out here in Kuzusuhara too. Perfect timing: I've been hoping for a word with you. Darius! Take over the shop for me!"

"It's not time for your break yet!" Darius hollered from the back of the store.

"Cover for me anyway! Akira's here, and I want to have a chat with him!"

A disgruntled Darius emerged. His eyes widened when he saw how much Akira's gear had changed. Dressed in a powered suit and shouldering a massive rifle, the young hunter was clearly no longer wet behind the ears. Darius could see that his business partner couldn't afford to treat Akira too lightly now, so he took over the storefront without further complaint.

Sheryl also got one of her underlings to take over her shift, and she joined Akira and Katsuragi at a table in the truck's employees-only area. Three hot sandwiches were laid out in front of them.

The girl was beaming, delighted at the chance to spend time with Akira. Akira and Katsuragi saw her attitude and exchanged puzzled looks, equally at a loss.

"So, Katsuragi, what do you wanna talk about?" Akira asked.

"Oh, right. Well, it's nothing major—I just wanted to ask how your work's been going," Katsuragi replied. Akira had chosen to ignore Sheryl for the moment, so the merchant got straight to the point. "To be blunt, you haven't sold me any relics in a while. I thought you might be taking time off while you got over an injury or something. But here you are, so I'm guessing that's not it."

"I'm just focusing on monster hunting right now. I got most of my relics in the Kuzusuhara Ruins, and I shouldn't have to tell you they're not the greatest place for that right now."

"Well, I can't argue with that," Katsuragi admitted. "Nobody's relic hunting in Kuzusuhara Town these days."

According to the rumors in Kugamayama, the recent onslaught had shaken up Kuzusuhara's monster population in a big way. The outskirts had

already been running low on worthwhile relics; the new monsters, more numerous and deadly than the indigenous ones, made hunting any remaining relics a bad bargain. On the other hand, the ruin's overall monster population had taken a major hit, creating a prime opportunity to venture deeper inside where finds remained plentiful.

Kugamayama City's administration encouraged that push inward, even erecting the forward base in anticipation of massive returns that would more than compensate for the steep cost of construction. The city had made no secret of its plans, and the depth of its commitment was convincing more and more businesses and hunters to get serious about conquering the heart of the ruins.

But not everyone was eager to rush into danger immediately. Many preferred to bide their time while the planned construction moved ahead, since working the depths of Kuzusuhara would be easier and safer once the city secured the route. In the meantime, they either left for other ruins or pitched in with the base.

"Is that your game plan too, Akira?" Katsuragi asked.

"Pretty much." Akira hadn't thought that far ahead, but he didn't bother to correct the merchant, since he agreed in principle. "But renting a car that can handle the wasteland isn't easy at my hunter rank, so I'm taking jobs here to work my way up."

Katsuragi took another look at Akira's gear: a powered suit, an AAH assault rifle, a CWH anti-materiel rifle, and a scanner. He had a hard time believing that a hunter kitted out like that would struggle to find transportation. "You look pretty well equipped to me," he said. "I doubt any rental agency would refuse service to a hunter with your arsenal."

"I may have gear, but my rank hasn't gone up much, since I've been selling my finds to you. At least, I need a higher rank if I want to rent anything decent."

"Oh, so that's the problem. Well, you can't do much about that." Katsuragi let out a little laugh. He couldn't force the issue if Akira's deal with him was to blame.

"Gimme a little more time. It's not like your business'll go under without the relics I bring you, right?"

"True enough."

In fact, Katsuragi had been most anxious to learn whether Akira had

given up on Sheryl and taken his business elsewhere. Reassured that this wasn't the case, he felt content that his up-front investment hadn't been wasted.

Akira shifted his gaze to Sheryl. "So, what're you doing here?"

"I'm overseeing the personnel I hired out to Mr. Katsuragi," she replied happily. "And with his generous help, I'm running a simple business of my own. My people and I made those hot sandwiches. We couldn't have done any of this without you, Akira. Thank you so much."

"I'm holding up my end of our bargain," Katsuragi added. "I give Sheryl's group a chance to earn some spending money by giving us a hand with simple work like moving boxes." He pointed to some children—all from Sheryl's gang—carrying ammo and other goods. "I act as their middleman for scrap-metal sales too, but this pays better. I assume you know what to do if you want me to do more for them?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Akira said. "I'll sell you more relics as soon as I get my hands on some."

"I'm counting on it." Katsuragi finished his sandwich, not entirely satisfied. "I'm still hungry. Sheryl, give me another one of those."

"Coming right up," Sheryl replied. "Would you like one too, Akira?"

Akira had also finished his sandwich, and like the merchant, he didn't feel quite full. So he handed Sheryl his hunter ID and asked for seconds. She took it and left to process the payment and fetch the food.

"Tell me, Akira," Katsuragi said suspiciously once she was gone, "did you do something to that girl?"

"Not that I know of; she just started acting like that one day," Akira replied, looking puzzled. "You think it's weird too?"

"Compared to when I first met her, she's like a different person. If you told me she switched places with her secret twin, I'd believe you. Of course, I prefer doing business with her now. She knows how to butter up customers, and she's got a good head on her shoulders. The sandwich shop was her idea, and it's doing well for her."

"You mean you don't run that place?"

"Nope, I'm not interested in branching out into the restaurant game. I'd rather stick to my specialty and make my fortune that way. I helped Sheryl arrange for supplies, but that business is hers."

"Is that gonna cause problems?"

“How? I placed the order for ingredients. I also made sure Sheryl and the kids helping her took baths and scrubbed themselves down, and the uniforms I got them are cheap but clean. They’re wearing disposable food prep gloves, and all they have to do is heat things up and add sauce. What could go wrong?”

Akira wasn’t especially interested in hygiene—he worried Katsuragi would come after him for compensation or cleanup if Sheryl’s food stand started trouble, and his question had been aimed at finding out how likely that was. But if hygiene was the first thing on the merchant’s mind, Akira doubted he had much to worry about. He didn’t press for details.

Sheryl returned with the additional sandwiches. Akira took his and gave it a closer look. The thick-sliced meat felt satisfying to bite down on, and the bread soaked up its juices along with the rich sauce, ensuring that no flavor escaped. It was a little on the skimpy side, but not small enough to merit complaints. The sandwich remained sufficiently tasty for him to recommend it if asked.

He was less certain that he would pay nearly a thousand aurum for it under normal circumstances. This food truck definitely charged wasteland rates. But the hunters working on and around the construction site wouldn’t quibble over such small sums. No one who finished their meal and still felt hungry would hold off on ordering another just to save pocket change. The size and price of the sandwiches were perfectly calculated for local demand.

“Did Katsuragi set the price for these?” Akira casually asked Sheryl.

“No, I did.” Nervously, she added, “Are you unhappy with them?”

“Nah, they taste pretty good, and I figure the price is par for the course out here.”

Sheryl smiled with delight. “What a relief! I’m so glad you approve.”

“Of course, these are what they call ‘wasteland rates,’” Katsuragi chimed in, laughing. “Hauling goods out into this danger zone to sell adds all sorts of costs, so you’ll have to bear with us.”

“Did you teach Sheryl about stuff like that?” Akira asked.

“Nope. I helped her stock up on ingredients and uniforms and so on, but only because she asked; I didn’t give her any business pointers.” Jokingly—or perhaps guiltily—Katsuragi added, “Don’t get the wrong idea: I wasn’t planning to hold you responsible if she failed. Honest.”

Akira ignored the unsolicited excuses and gave Sheryl an almost

admiring look. “Wow. That’s really something.”

“Thank you.” Sheryl gave him a shy smile. “But I couldn’t have done it without you or Mr. Katsuragi.”

Akira shared a look with Katsuragi. He couldn’t communicate with the merchant telepathically, but somehow, he could tell what Katsuragi wanted to ask him: *Are you* sure *you didn’t do anything to that girl?*

I really didn’t, Akira tried to respond with his gaze, although he wasn’t sure Katsuragi got the message.

Chapter 38: Yarata Scorpions

Akira sped through the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins on his motorcycle. He had signed up for another job supporting the temporary base—a more urgent task than before, as his grim expression showed. And Alpha, flying parallel to the bike, hurried him along.

Akira, she said, *you've got another call for backup. This makes three on hold.*

Already?! he snapped. *I haven't even reached the group I'm helping now yet! Are there supposed to be this many?!*

Don't ask me. Look on the bright side: with this many targets, you can look forward to a hefty reward. Of course, this isn't an extermination job, so they might pay you in hunter rank instead of money.

Akira couldn't suppress a heartfelt grimace. *I can't stand the thought of ending up in the red after all this work!*

He wasn't securing buildings this time—he'd taken too long to do it the day before, and so had been dropped from that assignment. Now he was supposed to rescue other hunters, which was exhausting work. Not that any single rescue was particularly onerous, but the distress calls just kept rolling in.

Akira took his job seriously, driving to each location as fast as he could. He didn't want to show up and find only a bunch of corpses because he'd taken his sweet time. The ruins were littered with debris of all shapes and sizes, but Alpha's impeccable driving skills allowed him to slip past, detour around, and even jump obstacles—always sticking to the shortest possible route.

The rescues themselves were a mixed bag. Some hunters called him in even though they could have saved themselves if they stuck it out; others finished exterminating their targets before he even got there—or ran off and left him to finish their fight alone. Akira struggled through his mounting fatigue, clearing requests until, at last, there was only one more call for help in his backlog.

He'd just teamed up with some hunters in distress to clear a building of monsters, so he stepped outside and heaved an exhausted sigh. Then he gulped down a recovery capsule—cheap medicine from Shizuka's store, but still good enough to perk him up.

I don't feel this stuff working, he grumbled.

Don't compare it to the medicine you got in the ruins, Alpha responded. *Its price and performance are both a whole lot lower. You might notice it kicking in if you kept taking more, but you'd need to swallow an awful lot of pills.*

No wonder people get hooked.

The East offered hunters a wide selection of combat drugs—recovery capsules were only one example—and many users relied on frequent, heavy doses of these substances. Low-quality medications could cause adverse side effects down the road, but that only mattered if you survived your present danger. So most hunters continued to take them liberally.

You've only got one distress call left to answer, so let's take a break after that, Alpha suggested. *You can tell HQ you need to resupply.*

What if they tell me to stick it out anyway? Akira asked.

As I told you before, your survival is my priority. I won't let you keep working a job that tells you to start punching monsters instead of making a run for more ammo.

Good point. Okay, let's get this next one taken care of.

Akira knew he wouldn't be able to continue his rescue work if Alpha lost her temper and refused to support him. Knowing that she would force him to take a breather after his next mission made him feel a little more relaxed.

Just as Alpha intended.

Akira parked his bike and looked up at a ruined building, the site of his next rescue. He heard gunfire and explosions from a fifth-floor window.

This must be the place, he said.

I'm glad they're still alive and fighting, from the sound of it, Alpha chimed in. *Let's go bail them out before they run out of ammo. I'll choose your entry route.*

Thanks. Akira dashed into the long-abandoned structure, following the guiding line displayed in his augmented vision.

Not a problem.

Alpha had scouted ahead and calculated the shortest route to his destination. He trusted her ability to locate threats, sprinting through the winding corridors and stairwells with abandon instead of moving cautiously for fear of an ambush.

Unmistakable traces of the hunter's struggle marked the building's interior. Akira hadn't seen any human corpses yet, but the remains of insectoid monsters lay everywhere, and their splattered gore coated the walls and floor.

Stop, Alpha commanded as the route markers vanished from Akira's view.

He cautiously raised his AAH. Nearby lay a monster still intact enough to study. The hard-shelled arachnid came up to Akira's waist and looked like an armored hybrid of a spider and a scorpion. The thing stood perfectly still, bathed in the gooey remains of its fellows.

It was a Yarata scorpion. These creatures camouflaged themselves by affixing materials from their surroundings to their sturdy exoskeletons. They could also feign death. This scorpion's shell looked of a piece with the scrap metal and debris around it. Countless bullets had failed to penetrate it, leaving only pockmarks that spoke to its durability.

Some of these are still alive, Alpha announced. *You'll have to wipe them out to proceed safely, but using your AAH will take too long. Switch to the CWH—it can kill them in one shot.*

On it. Akira readied the anti-materiel rifle.

The mountain of scorpion bodies around him didn't even twitch. Were they lifeless, too injured to move, or merely playing dead and waiting for prey to approach? He couldn't tell, and he couldn't risk leaving potential threats behind him. But shooting every suspicious bug would chew through his ammo supply—unless he could pick out the live ones by sight. Red scorpion outlines appeared in his vision—no ordinary human could distinguish living bugs from dead ones at a glance, but Alpha had no trouble at all.

Akira aimed at the targets and pulled the trigger. Armor-piercing bullets punched through his enemies' tough exoskeletons and destroyed their fleshy insides, killing them instantly. Several died before the rest stopped playing dead and attacked him, but he quickly dispatched them just the same.

All done, Alpha announced.

Great. Akira hurried past the scorpions, now nothing but a pile of corpses.

◆

The hunters who had called for backup were still holed up in a room on the fifth floor, grimly preparing for a monster onslaught.

"This is 157!" one of them shouted into his work terminal. "Come in, HQ!"

"This is sector A-4 headquarters," the operator replied. "What's the problem?"

"Don't give me that! Where the hell's our backup?!"

"We've already dispatched someone to your location. He's en route now. Sit tight."

"For how long?! We've been waiting forever!"

"Rescue personnel respond to calls in the order we get them, and we're backed up with all the requests. If you want to blame someone, blame the hunters who call for help with small fry—they're the ones making you wait. Just be patient. Out."

"Hey! Hang on! Shit! They hung up on us!"

The man's companions rushed to stop him from smashing his terminal into the floor—it was the last working one they had. Combat had trashed the rest of their communication equipment.

Yarata scorpion corpses littered the area around the door, the fruits of the hunters' desperate struggle to eliminate any bug that entered the room. The hunters suspected the things were all dead, but none of them felt like getting close enough to check. They could have fired on every bug in sight, but hesitated to waste their remaining ammo on breaking through the scorpions' tough exoskeletons. They'd used all their grenades and other explosives during their flight to this room, so now they were stuck with standard cartridges—far less effective—until help arrived. Squandering ammo wasn't an option.

The hunters couldn't bring themselves to leave their sanctuary. For all they knew, they might not even be able to see the floor through the swarming scorpions outside. Hardly an encouraging thought. So they

resigned themselves to hunkering down and waiting for backup.

"What should we do?" one asked. "Try calling HQ again?"

"Forget it," another replied. "They might stop answering us if we call too often with nothing new to report. Wait a while unless something changes."

"Shit. I just pray that change isn't an all-out attack on us."

They sat tight a short while longer, trying to mask their unease. Then at last they heard the change they were waiting for: gunshots outside, drawing steadily closer.

"Is that our backup?!"

"W-We're saved!"

But the men's cheers died on their lips. Alerted by the gunfire, the scorpions in and around the room stopped playing dead and began swarming toward them. The hunters grimaced as they turned their weapons on the horde.

◆

Akira went as fast as he could, but he had his hands full with the live scorpions that kept blocking his path. The bugs lay in wait among almost every group of corpses he passed, and some of them took a while to die even after he blew their heads off. In such cases, he destroyed their tails and legs, ensuring that they were at least incapacitated before he hurried onward.

They're everywhere! he griped as he swapped out his CWH's magazine. *How many does this make?!*

That one was number fifty-four, Alpha replied. *And yes, there are a lot of them.*

The AP cartridges Akira loaded into his CWH cost more than standard ammunition. They were designed to take down armored machines, and using them on Yarata scorpions would typically be overkill. But Akira's normal bullets—even fired in bursts—would have taken too long to punch through his enemies' rigid exoskeletons, so he reluctantly stuck to the pricier option. But when he ejected the empty CWH magazine, he felt for a moment as if he'd just thrown out a stack of bills.

I'm covering my own ammo costs, remember?! he fumed, scowling. *If*

they cheap out on my pay after this, I'm never taking this job again!

A simple extermination job would pay you based on the number and types of monsters you killed, but that's not what this is, Alpha mused. *We can't be sure about your compensation until the job is done. Remember: they only paid you the base twenty thousand aurum yesterday.*

I went over twenty thousand aurum in ammo ages ago! How much is today gonna cost me?!

You can tally that up once it's over. Being stingy with ammunition will get you killed.

I know that! Akira finished reloading his CWH and rushed onward. He killed another twenty or so scorpions before he got close to the room with the hunters and heard the ceaseless gunfire from inside.

◆

The hunters scrambled to shoot the "revived" scorpions. They had used up all their heavy ammunition before taking this defensive position, leaving them with less firepower than they would have liked to kill the bugs. It was all they could do to hold the toughest creatures at bay as they gradually fell back to the walls.

The men's faces filled with fear and resignation as they realized they were done for. Their weapons ran out of ammo, their mouths froze in twisted grins—

—and an armor-piercing bullet blew a hole through a hard-shelled arachnid right beside them and lodged in the wall behind. The bug instantly fell still, stone dead.

"What the—?" one muttered. It had all happened so quickly that he didn't even realize he'd been rescued.

More shots followed. Scorpion after scorpion fell. In no time at all, the creatures that had cornered the hunters were no more. When the men finally came to their senses, they saw Akira holding his anti-materiel rifle.

"Backup? W-We're saved!" Relief swept over them. They exhaled and slumped to the floor.

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Akira knew exactly what was going on in the room before he entered it—Alpha showed him both the scorpions and the hunters through the walls. So he could spring through the doorway and gun down all his targets in the blink of an eye. When he saw the men relax, he let out a relieved sigh of his own.

That was a close one, he said. *We made it just in the nick of time.*

But thankfully, we weren't too late, Alpha responded. *Now, let's get out of here. You'll end up needing a rescue too if we linger.*

Good point. Let's hurry. Akira went to join the other hunters.

"Thanks," one said. He glanced around, puzzled. "Where're the others? Are they searching other parts of the building?"

"No, it's just me," Akira replied.

"You've gotta be kidding! Then again, I guess you *did* manage to handle it alone. Hmm..." The man looked ambivalent. He felt incensed that they'd been sent only a one-man rescue party—yet that lone reinforcement *had* undeniably saved them.

Akira was equally surprised to learn that he'd been ordered to clear a nest of Yarata scorpions alone. But before he blamed headquarters, he inquired, "What did you tell HQ when you called for backup?"

"That there were bug-looking things everywhere and we needed help ASAP," the man replied. "We called them a few more times, but they just told us to wait. To be honest, we almost didn't make it. We owe you big time."

Akira guessed what had happened: headquarters had assumed the men were encountering smaller, less dangerous insectoid monsters. The mix-up reminded him how important relaying accurate information could be.

"We should clear out of here before any more show up," he said, returning his attention to the matter at hand. "The route I took should still be safe. Let's hurry."

"G-Good idea. Hey! Come on!"

Akira led a speedy retreat. The hunters paused several times when they spotted scorpion corpses, but they took courage and kept going when Akira approached the remains unharmed. They all escaped the building without further incident.

While the men rejoiced at their survival, Akira called headquarters. "This is Fourteen. Come in, HQ."

“This is sector A-4 headquarters,” a voice responded. “What’s your situation?”

“I successfully rescued the targets. I’m about to head back to the temporary base.”

“Negative. Have the hunters you rescued return on their own and proceed to your next objective.”

Akira scowled. “No.” He spoke emphatically, though he took care to keep anger out of his voice. “That building was crawling with Yarata scorpions. No way in hell am I going to the next one without a stop to resupply.”

He grimaced as he waited for an answer. If the operator told him to go anyway, he was ready to abandon the job on the spot. But no answer proved immediately forthcoming, and the muffled chatter on the other end of the call didn’t seem to bode well.

“Come in, HQ,” he said suspiciously. “What’s going on?”

“Please confirm,” came the cautious response. “Did you really encounter a swarm of Yarata scorpions? Is that building a Yarata scorpion nest?”

“I don’t know if it’s a nest, but that building is definitely full of bug-like monsters with exoskeletons that normal AAH ammo bounces right off of. Send someone else to check if you don’t believe me.”

The operator’s tone became even more serious. “I rescind my previous order. Return to the temporary base ASAP. I assume the terminal we loaned you is still intact?”

“Mine’s fine. As for the others... I think they said they’re all busted apart from the one they called you on.”

“Return immediately, and absolutely do not lose that terminal!” barked the voice from headquarters. “Don’t break any more! Out!” The call ended.

Akira exchanged looks with the other hunters. The men were clearly nervous, and he felt a little rattled himself.

Akira, there’s no point worrying about what you don’t know, Alpha said, with a reassuring smile. *Head back for now, and consider yourself lucky that you get to return to base without antagonizing your client.*

I guess you’re right, Akira responded slowly. He thought that something had probably gone wrong, but Alpha seemed happy, so he had nothing to worry about.

The hunters jogged back to base, while Akira drove slowly behind them on his motorcycle. His job was to provide rescue, not security, and he'd completed that task the moment he led the men outside (which was why headquarters had initially ordered him to go to his next assignment). So Akira could have ridden straight to the base ahead of the men, but they'd pleaded with him to stay and escort them.

On the way, he did his best to surveil the other hunters and their surroundings, practicing with his scanner while he drove. But it didn't go well. He couldn't even get accurate readings on the men right in front of him.

This isn't easy, he grumbled as he played with the device's settings. *I get wonky results as soon as I change anything from how Elena had it.*

She had it reasonably well optimized, Alpha responded. *It's no surprise that changing her settings on a whim causes a significant drop in performance.*

Oh. Akira mused. *Should I just leave these as they are, then?*

No. Experiment with different options, learn what each one does, and get used to adjusting them.

Akira went on trying different options, referring to the manual in his augmented vision. As he did so, the scouting readout in his transparent display visor changed. A rough three-dimensional model of Akira's environment filled the right side of his view. He saw himself in the center and the other hunters walking ahead of him, but the men appeared even less distinct and accurate than his immediate surroundings—a suboptimal configuration for scouting.

This really isn't easy, he muttered.

The scanner synthesized all the various data it collected. If he could zero in on specific types of information, he'd be able to hunt more flexibly. Settings made all the difference between a rough estimate of what could be found where and a precise reading of his target's location, shape, and more.

Alpha, are there any rules of thumb for configuring this thing?

Good question, she replied. *Typically, you're supposed to run a superficial sweep of a wide area and then narrow your focus to get in-depth results on anything that stands out.*

She added that, depending on his environment, he should adjust the frequency with which he shifted between broad and focused scans and the

relative emphasis on video, audio, or motion-based analysis. Diverting more resources to echolocation made sense in cramped corridors—but not in wide-open spaces. Video analysis was less important when he could see with his naked eyes but a priority when he couldn't.

Akira struggled to process the lecture. Then a thought struck him. *You use this scanner too, right? Won't you have a harder time spotting things if I mess with the settings? Is this safe?*

Don't worry, Alpha replied. *I take raw data from its sensors and perform my own analysis—the settings don't affect my scouting. Besides, I don't need instruments to track threats here. So don't hold back on my account.*

Relieved, Akira tried making a major change to the settings. The hunters vanished from his display, replaced with static. Noticing an option labeled "automatic calibration," he gave it a try. The message "calibrating" filled his screen for a few seconds, and then the hunters reappeared on the readout, which now showed a crisp, clear picture. Such features were one benefit of composite scanners.

Akira was just wondering if he really needed to bother using anything else when Alpha disabled the option.

You won't learn anything from this practice if you let it do the work for you, she said. *Use it as a reference but adjust the settings yourself.*

Akira grimaced but conceded, *Fine.*

Alpha smiled, contented.

The trip back to the temporary base continued uneventfully until, without warning, Alpha's expression turned grave.

What's wrong? Akira asked, frowning. Her look was enough to unsettle him.

Either leave those men behind and drive on ahead right now or tell them to head for the base as fast as their legs can carry them, she replied. *A swarm of Yarata scorpions is closing in on us.*

"Hey!" Akira shouted at the hunters walking ahead of him. "Run for the base! More scorpions are headed our way!"

The men turned to stare at him in surprise.

"I'll try to slow them down!" he added, looking grim. "So run like hell!"

The men hurriedly looked around, but they could see no sign of monsters. "Are you sure?!" one hollered. "Which way?! Where are they?!"

“Get moving, or I’ll drive ahead and leave you with no backup!”

At that, the hunters broke into a headlong dash. Akira surveyed his surroundings, but he couldn’t spot the bugs either. Even his scanner, which was performing fairly well thanks to the automatic calibration, showed only the nearby terrain.

Where is this swarm? he asked. *Is it far away?*

Akira, I’m about to augment your vision. Keep calm. Alpha highlighted the scorpions in Akira’s view.

His expression froze.

◆

The hunters ran frantically toward the base, darting glances around them. They still couldn’t see any scorpions, but the warning came from their rescuer, and—more importantly—they never wanted to get cornered by the bugs again, so they kept going.

But then the man in the lead came to a sudden halt. His companions pulled up short behind him.

“What’d you stop for?!”

Before the lead hunter had a chance to respond, what looked like another pile of debris up ahead sprang to life. Part of the scorpion swarm had circled around ahead of them and disguised itself, waiting to ambush the group. The nearby rubble was crawling with creatures so well camouflaged that the men couldn’t pick them out until they started moving.

The hunters scrambled for their weapons. But while they focused fire to bring down one enemy, others steadily closed in. Once again, they were trapped.

Suddenly Akira appeared, racing in at top speed and knocking scorpions aside with his motorcycle. The bike almost tipped over as he dragged one leg on the ground and hit the brakes, drawing a tight circle around the hunters and using the wheels to send a succession of meter-long bugs flying. Once he came to a stop beside the dumbfounded men, he raised his CWH and fired in the direction of the base. His armor-piercing bullets dropped one camouflaged scorpion after another.

When he stopped shooting, he pointed at the rubble-strewn street and shouted, “Go!”

The hunters still couldn't tell the monsters from the debris that littered the roadway. Making a break for it would leave them vulnerable to any bugs still in hiding. But they couldn't afford to sit still. So they ran where Akira pointed as fast as their legs would carry them. For now, his shots had cleared their path of enemies.

Hopefully.

◆

Akira continued supporting the hunters' retreat. He was doing well for the moment—seeing through the bugs' disguises with Alpha's help and easily blowing them away with armor-piercing ammo—but that did nothing to lighten his scowl.

They're this close and I still can't pick them up, he said. *What's going on?*

Red outlines marked the scorpions in Akira's vision. He could see them all clearly: disguised as debris, hiding under rubble, or swarming toward him from behind obstacles. But his scanner displayed almost no hostiles, only registering the bugs as part of the terrain.

That's about what you can expect using standard, automated settings to scout for camouflaged threats, Alpha snickered. *The scanner can't recognize a Yarata scorpion passing itself off as debris any more than you can.*

The device used a wide range of sensors to assess its targets, she explained, but making sense of the results wasn't easy, and precision varied widely based on the method used and the time allotted for processing. Collating all available data left insufficient time for analysis, but paring down the input yielded less accurate results. Learning to adjust those options as appropriate would dramatically improve Akira's ability to locate threats with his scanner.

You mean you want me to do all that on my own? Akira asked, forcing a grin as he fought.

Not right this second! Alpha cheerfully shot back.

Well, thanks, 'cause I've got my hands full!

Akira correctly inferred that one day she would demand he master the scanner, and that she would drill him thoroughly to make certain he did.

Sooner or later, he would need to operate his suit, drive his motorcycle, use his weapons, and calibrate his scanner without her support and at a level that satisfied her. This battle was just one step on that long road, he thought as he kept mowing down scorpions with his anti-materiel rifle.

His bullets punched through the bugs' exoskeleton armor and destroyed the nervous systems within, instantly killing or incapacitating them. But the swarm kept coming. Akira cursed the endless onslaught as he took aim at his next target. Then Alpha cut in and warned, *That's your last cartridge.*

You mean I'm out of AP ammo?! he demanded, alarmed.

Unfortunately, yes. Switch weapons.

Grimly stowing away his CWH, Akira gripped an AAH in each hand and trained them both on his next target. Standard ammunition had little effect on the scorpions' armor, but burst fire from two assault rifles would do the trick, especially with Alpha guiding his aim. Enough hits on the same point cracked the tough shell, letting his bullets rip into its flesh. Continuous fire pinned the creature down, knocked it aside, and then ricocheted inside its exoskeleton to devastating effect. These hardy beasts of the wasteland could withstand several shots to all but their most vital organs, but not bullets shredding them from the inside.

With Alpha's support, he still gave the scorpions a run for their money. But each kill took more time and effort than with armor-piercing ammo, and those delays slowly but steadily forced him to give ground.

Akira soon emptied his magazines. He resorted to punches and kicks to beat back the bugs that scuttled up to him as he reloaded. Then he tried firing each rifle at a different monster, with targeting so precise that it even accounted for the shift each hit caused in his targets' positions. He took out both at the same time, but his magazines were empty again.

Alpha! I'm gonna run out of normal ammo too if this keeps up! he shouted. *What's the plan?*

Either switch to melee combat or abandon the others and make a run for the base, she replied.

Can't we call HQ for backup?

Those hunters tried several times while running away, but the response didn't seem promising.

Then I guess we'll stick it out until the last minute.

Akira had worked hard to rescue the hunters and wanted to get them out

of this alive, but he had no intention of going down with them. And the situation was only getting worse. The men's exhaustion was reaching dangerous levels as they ran on, gasping for air and pushing the limits of their endurance. The scorpions, on the other hand, closed in relentlessly. Unless something changed, it was only a matter of time before the swarm overran the group.

This is starting to look dicey, Akira remarked.

Tell them to take shelter in a nearby building and hope help arrives, Alpha suggested. *With luck, they could still make it.*

I guess I've got no choice. Can you recommend a good spot for them to dig in? I'll let them know and lead them to it. After that, they're on their own. Do you see anything nearby that fits the bill?

Let me think. You might try— Actually, that won't be necessary. Alpha paused in the very act of pointing to a nearby building, directing her finger toward the temporary base instead.

Akira looked in the direction she indicated and saw several armed vehicles approaching. As soon as the cars passed him, machine guns opened fire, mowing down scorpions. The powerful barrage instantly pulverized the hard-shelled bugs, and the cars drove on, annihilating every monster in their path.

Akira parked his motorcycle on the side of the road where he wouldn't get in the way. He was just thinking that the other hunters' distress calls must have paid off when another car pulled up beside him.

"Are you Fourteen?" asked a man riding in it.

"Yeah," Akira answered. "Why?"

"We're with the Kugamayama City defense force, under orders from HQ. Give me your work terminal."

Akira did as he was told.

"Great," the man said. "Your job is now complete. You're free to go."

"Hang on," Akira called. "You don't look like a rescue party. Is something going on?"

"Yarata scorpions are overrunning the underground ruins. There must be a huge nest nearby, and it looks like this operation stirred it up. I hear they're going to start securing the area around the base all over again."

"Oh, so you're here to wipe out the scorpions?"

"No, that's secondary. Our objective is to retrieve terminals out on

loan.” Seeing the puzzled look on Akira’s face, the man grinned mirthlessly and added, “Those terminals should contain records of the attacks, so the plan is to analyze all that data and locate the nest or nests. But a lot of hunters haven’t come back, which means less data, and apparently that will make it harder to pinpoint how many nests we’re dealing with and where they are. So we got orders to head out and bring their terminals back.”

Akira realized why the man’s grin seemed so bitter. Recovering the terminals was important; hunters’ safety was, at best, a secondary concern. Only the fact that his orders would still result in more survivors kept him from looking even more depressed.

“Hey, why not help us round them up?” the man offered. “You must be confident in your skills if you escorted dead weight all this way.”

“Gimme a break,” Akira groaned, shaking his head. “I’m in no shape to take on another job. I thought I packed ammo to spare, but I’ve already used up almost all of it, and I’m not even sure my contract’ll let me recoup the cost.”

“Tough luck.” The man chuckled at Akira’s disgruntled expression. “Well, make sure you put a guarantee about ammo costs in your contract next time. Later.” With that, he drove off.

Akira looked over at the other hunters and saw them talking with someone in another car. They were too far away for him to overhear their conversation, but the distance posed no difficulty to Alpha.

They’re asking for a ride back to base and getting turned down, she informed him. *But they’ll be fine on their own now. Let’s head home.*

I’m game. Akira breezed past the men on his motorbike. He heard a voice call him to stop, but he ignored it and sped on.

◆

The hunters were making their way back to base, looking dead tired. Their route was safe, since the armed vehicles had cleared it, but feeling safe brought back all the fatigue that stress had made them forget. Yet they limited themselves to only occasional rests and pressed on, sighing and grumbling.

“Would it have killed that kid or the defense force to help us back to base?” one asked.

“Let’s just keep moving,” another responded. “Those guys took out every monster on the road, but it won’t stay safe forever.”

“I guess you’re right. Still, who *was* that kid? He seemed pretty tough.”

“Beats me. I only know he’s good enough that they ordered him into that swarm alone.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” another man chimed in. “I forget who I heard this from, but Druncam’s young hunters are supposed to be working jobs around this base too. One kid on rescue detail’s supposed to be a big deal—saved dozens of people in one day or something. Maybe that was him.”

“A Druncam kid, huh? Word is they throw their weight around wearing gear that comes out of seasoned hunters’ paychecks. But if that kid was one of ’em, I can’t blame anyone with his skills for getting cocky.”

“I’m trying to remember that name I heard. I think it was Ka...Ka...Katsura?”

“Don’t ask me. Let’s just keep moving.”

Despite their chitchat, the exhausted hunters were making good time as they trotted back to the temporary base.

Chapter 39: A Job Addressed to Akira

As usual, Akira was back at Cartridge Freak for ammunition. But his latest order brought a frown to Shizuka's face.

"What do you suddenly need so many AP cartridges for?" she asked suspiciously. "Are you planning to use a lot of them? I doubt you'd buy this many just to keep some on hand."

Shizuka surmised that, at the very least, Akira must have been fighting monsters too tough for standard cartridges, and they had been so strong, numerous, or both that he'd used up his existing supply. Had he been reckless again? Shizuka wondered as she scrutinized Akira—both out of concern for his safety and to spot anything he tried to hide.

"Would you mind telling me what happened?"

"Well, I took a job connected to the temporary base at Kuzusuhara Town," Akira began. "While I was out there, I ran into a ton of Yarata scorpions, and..."

He recounted the events so matter-of-factly that Shizuka concluded he must not have been in any unusual danger. In fact, he'd been so desperate he'd considered abandoning the other hunters he'd rescued—but he glossed over that detail without giving it much thought. After all, he could have escaped easily on his own, and the men had made it through safely. He didn't omit it out of concern for her reaction—she would have picked up on the slightest hint of that. Rather, the tight scrapes he'd recently been in—first with the cannon insects and then with the two-headed gluttonous crocodile—had thrown his sense of danger out of whack.

"And normal ammo wouldn't cut it, so I decided to stock up on AP cartridges, just in case," he concluded. "That's why I asked for more than usual."

Relieved, Shizuka gave Akira a warm smile. Then she made a suggestion that would be good for both his safety and her bottom line. "In that case," she said, "keeping AP cartridges on hand is important, but I recommend modding your AAH to fire overpressure ammunition. It has its

limits, but it should give you the stopping power to fight Yarata scorpions without resorting to fancier cartridges."

"Modding it? But isn't that hard to do?"

"Don't worry; you would only have to swap out a few parts. As long as you know how to perform basic maintenance, you'll do fine."

The AAH assault rifle boasted a wide selection of optional components that were cheap, effective, and easy to install. As a result, many hunters opted to customize their weapons rather than trade up when they grew dissatisfied with its stock performance. Some suggested, half jokingly, that the gun's customizability was a recruitment tool for AAH lovers.

"When you run into monsters a bit too tough for your AAH, I'd say that boosting its firepower makes more sense than switching to the CWH right away. It will give you more options in combat, and in the long run, you'll spend less on ammo than you would using AP cartridges excessively," Shizuka explained. The more Akira spent on ammo, the better for her business, but she couldn't help herself from adding a caveat. "Of course, custom parts aren't exactly cheap either, and you've got your budget to consider, so I won't push you. Still, I'd say that modding is your best bet. Are you interested?"

Akira had no reason to refuse, apart from his finances. And the pay from his latest job had solved his money troubles. Unlike his day of securing buildings, his rescue work had been well-received—and well-compensated. So he was currently flush with money.

"All right," he said without hesitation, "I'll go with whatever you suggest."

"Thank you for your purchase." Shizuka jokingly gave a deferential bow, amused by Akira's self-satisfied grin—a look common enough among hunters who had done nicely for themselves.

She set out a range of custom AAH parts on the counter before him: wells for high-capacity magazines, sights that could link with scanners, barrels that increased firepower, and more. Akira inspected each part with interest as she explained its function.

"There sure are a lot," he said when she was done.

"This is only a fraction of what's on the market," Shizuka responded. "Some parts make you wonder why anyone would need to build them into an AAH in the first place. People go out of their way to add features that it

would be cheaper and more effective to buy another gun for. You can feel the AAH lovers' obsession in those things."

"It sounds like they get pretty crazy. You said this custom barrel boosts firepower. Does it really make a difference, even using standard ammo?"

"Quite a difference, and not just in firepower—it reduces recoil too. I couldn't tell you how it works, but there's some impressive tech behind it, some sort of Old World science."

"Old World, huh?" Akira had experienced firsthand just how bizarre Old World technology could be. The monsters were an obvious example—even with his meager scientific knowledge, he could tell that many of the creatures defied sense. A gluttonous crocodile's ability to grow turrets and treads after eating a tank didn't square with his understanding of animals or machines, but Old World tech made it possible. And while Alpha taught him basic science in their daily lessons, she had forbidden him from citing monsters as counterexamples. The almost magical advancements of the long-dead civilizations had made contradictions and impossibilities reality, and Akira would need to spend the rest of his life studying if he hoped to learn how. So Alpha had told him not to worry about it.

"I know we shouldn't accept everything at face value just because it's from the Old World, but learning how it really works would take a lifetime of research," Shizuka added. "I'm sure scientists in corporate labs are happy to do that, but I hear even they give up on making sense of some things."

Such products of Old World tech included gun barrels that changed not only the mass and velocity, but even the physical characteristics of bullets; high-capacity magazines that held far more cartridges than their size should allow; and many more. And in most cases, their underlying principles remained shrouded in mystery.

"So, if you're not satisfied just saying it's 'Old World,' you'll have to become a researcher and find a better one yourself," Shizuka teased. "How would you like to be a scientist?"

Akira laughed. "I'm a hunter, so I'll leave it at 'Old World tech' for now." He would have been lying if he'd said he wasn't interested in learning more, but he had too many more pressing demands on his time and attention to waste either on technological research.

He ended up purchasing the handful of custom AAH parts Shizuka recommended, along with a sight that could link with his scanner. Paying

for them and his ammo ate up most of his recent earnings. Better gear promised safer and more profitable work, but buying it at the expense of living conditions would take a toll on his day-to-day existence and ultimately come back to bite him while in the field. Hunters who failed to balance both concerns usually ended either dead or washed up. But Akira was a child of the slums, and living out of cheap hotels fit his definition of luxury—an improvement, not a step back. So despite his lavish spending on equipment, he wasn't sacrificing comfort.

"Shizuka!" Elena's voice called from the back room. "I'd like a word with you!"

"Wait just a minute, Akira," Shizuka said, smiling as if at some private joke, and left to join her friend.

Akira waited, nonplussed. After a few moments, he heard more voices from the back.

"What? Akira's here?!" Elena cried, flustered.

"That's right," Shizuka cheerfully replied. "And you promised to show him when it came in, remember? Come on."

"You said that, not me!"

"But you didn't refuse. Now, let's go. Being seen won't hurt you."

"Hey! No shoving!" Elena shouted as she emerged from the back room, pushed along by Shizuka.

Akira froze as soon as he set eyes on her. He could see her feminine curves clear as day through the glossy, formfitting material of her ultrathin powered suit. The sheer garment left nothing to the imagination. He couldn't help recalling the naked image of her Alpha had reconstructed from her old scanner data, and the mere memory of its bewitching mix of simplicity and sensuality sufficed to rattle him.

Akira's and Elena's eyes met. She sensed his uneasy embarrassment and blushed, flustered herself.

"*This* is a B3-CSD powered suit Elena's wearing," Shizuka chimed in, smiling. She was the only one in the shop who still had her composure. "Unlike your suit, Akira, it doesn't use an exoskeleton. It's baggy before you switch it on and shrinks to fit perfectly flush with the skin while active. But it never gets in the way; in fact, it feels like wearing nothing at all. You can even feel the breeze on your skin, thanks to the breathable material. And of course, it's no slouch when it comes to boosting strength either."

Shizuka was right: Elena felt naked with the suit on. It insulated her from heat and cold, but she could feel the air on her skin so vividly that she had to look at herself to feel sure she wasn't walking around in her birthday suit. And while she had known the suit would be revealing, it fit so loosely in its powered-off state that its appearance when activated had taken her by surprise. The shopkeeper had taken advantage of her moment of panic.

"I'm not sure the specs make up for this, Shizuka," Elena grumbled. She glared, but despite her skill as a hunter, she couldn't manage to look menacing when she was so obviously embarrassed.

"I took all your requests into account, and that suit was the best match," Shizuka countered, her smile never faltering. "You wanted something you could keep wearing your body armor with. You said that bulky gloves would make it harder to control your sensors. You didn't want your suit's shape to limit what gear you could use with it. You asked for a suit that's easy to put on, able to link with scanners, and gives you a lot of flexibility to adjust how much it enhances your strength despite having high peak performance. Is there a problem?"

Elena was at a loss for words. She had made every demand she could think of, knowing that she was being a bit unrealistic, and this suit met all of them. She was in no position to complain.

"I have a hard time believing that my budget would cover a suit with all those features," she said, fumbling for a retort.

But Shizuka responded with alacrity. "Sara generously chipped in to help out her dear partner. Don't forget to thank her."

"Oh. That explains everything." Elena was genuinely delighted by Sara's financial assistance. Yet the thought that those extra funds had landed her in this suit soured her smile.

Suddenly, Shizuka turned to Akira and asked, "So, what do you think of Elena's new suit?"

Akira looked Elena in the eye again, then blushed and looked away. "I think it's too racy," he said, struggling to act casual. "She should probably wear something over it."

Belatedly, Elena realized that she should have just covered the suit with her usual body armor. She had been too flustered to think of it earlier. "G-Good point! S-See you!" With a hollow laugh, she darted back behind the counter and into the other room. Akira watched her go in silence, while

Shizuka held back her own chuckle.

Akira took a deep breath. He needed to be calmer if he wanted to have a decent conversation with Elena when she got back. To distract himself, he asked, “Shizuka, do high-end powered suits all look like that?”

“No, not at all,” she replied. “Although there is a steady demand for those models, so they aren’t exactly rare.”

That surprised Akira. He found himself wondering if most women’s powered suits were like that, and if the hunters who bought them minded. Shizuka took one look at his inscrutable expression and guessed what was on his mind.

“I don’t mean that people go outside wearing just one of those suits,” she added, chuckling. “People without augments can’t operate powered armor normally, so they use inner wear that’s higher spec than most powered suits.”

Essentially, Elena’s suit was meant to be worn under something else. Tanklike powered armor put intense strain on its users, and wearing a second suit underneath had proved simpler and more efficient than installing new systems in the armor to compensate. Further development had yielded thin suits specialized for layering and, ultimately, all-purpose models that could be worn under body armor or ordinary clothing. These suits, also called “powered inner wear,” ranged from plain versions to elaborate lines modeled on women’s underwear, which met demands ordinary suits could not.

“Even I wear one under my clothes,” Shizuka explained, “although it’s a cheaper model than Elena’s.”

“You do?” Akira asked.

“Yes. I couldn’t carry heavy weapons and ammo without it.”

“That makes sense, now that you mention it. You make it look so natural that I never noticed.” Akira was so used to seeing Shizuka shift weighty merchandise with ease that he’d never thought to question it before.

“A lot of people don’t. But I’m not the only person who hides a powered suit under everyday clothes. Some people do it to put others off their guard, so be careful. A hunter needs to learn to spot these things.”

“I’ll watch out.” Akira felt keenly that he still had a lot to learn.

Elena returned, wearing her usual body armor over her suit. She exchanged a look with Akira, and they grinned to mask their earlier

embarrassment.

"Thank you again for the scanner," Akira said, hoping to smooth things over. "It's been a huge help."

"I'm glad you like it," Elena replied, following his cue. "Those all-in-one models are definitely better for beginners. I hear composite scanners have made big strides recently, so they might become the next big trend as..."

Akira and Elena kept chatting, trying unusually hard to seem relaxed. Shizuka found them quite amusing.

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Alpha, how much longer till we get there? Akira asked, driving through the desert in a rented car.

Thirty minutes at this pace, she replied from the passenger seat.

Okay. So, why are you dressed like that?

Alpha was wearing a maid outfit—one designed for aesthetics, with no thought given to practicality. A lavish expanse of elegant, lustrous black fabric set off the pure-white apron layered over it. She showed no skin at all below the neck—her skirt covered her long legs nearly to the ankles, while long sleeves and snowy gloves concealed her arms to the fingertips. There she sat, a vision of prim beauty.

Oh, do you have a request? she inquired with her alluring smile. *All you have to do is ask, and I'll change into any outfit you'd like to see me in.*

Nah, nothing like that, Akira replied. *I was just wondering how you choose your clothes, since none of them seem like a good fit for the wasteland.*

So you're interested in my decision-making process? You could say I'm quite picky, or that I choose at random.

Picky, huh? Akira recalled the risqué bathing suit she had worn on a past hunting trip. She had shown more skin when she stripped naked to bathe with him, but the bathtub had lulled him into a kind of trance. Out in the desert and wide awake, he'd found her swimwear somewhat distracting.

Well, he thought to himself, *it could be worse.* If he pursued the matter, she might switch into something harder to ignore, so he changed the subject.

I know it's too late for second thoughts, but should I really have gone with this car? he asked. *I figured something made for hunters in the wasteland would have a machine gun or something. I mean, I'm not asking for a cannon, but I feel like we should've spent a little more and rented a nicer car with some weapons.*

Akira had taken one of the cheapest vehicles that the rental agency offered to hunters. The same business would have rented him a nicer car with built-in weapons for only a slightly higher fee.

This one will do, Alpha replied. She had selected a sturdy, well-constructed vehicle that could act as a shield over those with offensive capabilities. *You reached hunter rank twenty after that last job, and I picked the most cost-effective option currently available to you. It doesn't have weapons, but you can make up for that by killing any monsters yourself. That will make for good training too.*

Well, you might have a point, Akira said dejectedly. He hadn't been interested in the rental agency's more exotic offerings, like motorcycles with built-in machine guns, but he had hoped that such weapons would come with a four-wheeled vehicle by default.

Alpha smiled soothingly. *Onboard weapons systems can wait until you buy your own car. They're usually tied to the vehicle's control system, which means my support doesn't apply to rentals. I can't exactly go around taking over computers you don't own, after all.*

Ah, so that's why.

The car's control system doubles as a rental scanner, and the Hunter Office uses it to track your kills—so fooling around with it could get a price put on your head if you're not careful. Still want to give it a try? Alpha grinned mischievously.

Don't even think about it, Akira replied as the color drained from his face a bit.

Very well. Alpha seemed to enjoy watching him squirm.

What would you do if I'd said yes without thinking it over? he demanded, glaring at her in annoyance.

But Alpha's smile only broadened as she stared him down. *If you told me to go through with it after I explained the risks, I would.* She brought her face close to his, and he recoiled slightly. *I told you not to help Elena and Sara too, but in the end, I went along with your decision. And when that*

horde of monsters swarmed out of Kuzusuhara, you ignored my advice and tried to answer an emergency listing even if it meant going alone and on foot. I could have used your suit to stop you by force, but I accepted your choice. Isn't that right?

Y-Yeah, I guess.

I'd say that I do everything in my power to respect your choices. Wouldn't you? Alpha added, cheerful but emphatic. *So, Akira, think them over carefully.*

Erm, right, Akira answered stiffly, wishing now that he had never broached the subject.

They continued chatting until he asked a question that had been bugging him: *By the way, you know those generic extermination jobs I've been taking? They pay a little just for turning in data on monsters I spot, even if I don't kill them. Why is that? I mean, "extermination" is in the name.*

They use those statistics to study population distributions, Alpha replied. *I suppose they dispatch extermination teams as needed if too many monsters show up in any one area.*

Despite their name, the jobs were about reconnaissance as much as elimination. They were only categorized with exterminations out of convenience, because such jobs specified no location. Consequently, they offered only meager pay for loitering near the city limits but decent rewards to hunters who roamed farther afield, even if they encountered no monsters.

So, are there hunters that don't fight monsters, just zoom around the wasteland in fast cars and outrun anything that chases them? Akira asked idly, amused by the explanation.

There are, Alpha immediately confirmed.

Really? Akira was taken aback. He'd meant the question partly as a joke, assuming no one would make a career out of just driving around.

Yes. I believe they're called "racers."

These hunters, she added, loaded powerful scanners into cars customized for speed on desert terrain. They enjoyed surprisingly good reputations because they took the initiative to patrol wide swathes of dangerous territory. But most racers were short-lived—only the best drivers could shake off the hordes of monsters that often hounded them. The pay was also worse than relic hunting, so racers were rare.

Akira listened with interest. *So, that's another way to earn a living*, he

mused. *I guess there's more to hunting than finding relics and killing monsters.*

Those are certainly the basics, Alpha responded. *They're just not the only ways to make money. Of course, that has nothing to do with you. What you need are hunting fundamentals that will get you through ruins.* She smiled expectantly.

Akira grinned back. *I know, but try to be patient with me until I'm strong enough to hack it in the ruin you're after.*

In that case, give me a demonstration of what you can do now. It will help me design your training regimen. Alpha cheerfully pointed up ahead.

A two-meter-long monster was running at the car and closing in fast. There was nothing graceful about its twisted appearance—like a rodent stretched into the shape of a large predator—but what it lacked in agility it made up for with the brute strength common to all its kind.

Akira parked, got out, and leveled one of his AAHs at the creature. He had already customized the weapon with the parts from Shizuka and loaded it with overpressure cartridges. When he took aim at the beast, the rifle sight worked with his scanner to display the distance to his target and mark nearby threats. As he carefully steadied his aim and pulled the trigger, he wondered how much he could do now, without any help from Alpha.

His shot flew harmlessly through the empty air just to the right of his target.

Too bad, Alpha remarked. *Two meters too far to the right.* She augmented his vision, displaying the missed shot's trajectory just long enough for him to see what had happened.

Once again, Akira carefully set his sights on the monster, adjusting his aim based on what he had just seen and using his powered suit to fix the weapon in the right position. Then he fired.

His bullet sped past the creature's left side.

One meter too far left this time, Alpha informed him. *You almost got it.*

As the beast charged toward him, wrathful and voracious, Akira took a deep breath and remained calm. He knew panic would bring him that much closer to death, while agitation would back him into a corner. Keeping his mind clear and his wits about him, he carefully aimed and fired a third time. At last his bullet struck the creature's body, but missed its vitals. The thing merely winced and kept on running.

He took a few more shots. All found their marks but failed to halt the beast's charge.

His target was dangerously close now.

Akira sighed and swapped magazines, switching from sharpshooting with overpressure cartridges to strafing with standard ammo—more powerful than before, thanks to his mods. A burst of fire struck the whole area around his target, scoring hit after hit as sheer quantity made accuracy irrelevant. This was no longer a question of vulnerabilities. The beast fell, riddled with bullets, and died.

Akira felt sure that with Alpha's support, his first shot would have been fatal. *I figured it wouldn't be that easy*, he grumbled, lamenting his own lack of skill. *How are you such a good shot, Alpha? Is there a trick to it?*

My marksmanship just comes from devoting extraordinary computing power to high-precision trajectory calculations, Alpha replied. *So unfortunately, learning my formulas wouldn't do you any good.*

I see. Akira sighed. His head drooped as he considered how hopeless he was without her.

Imagine the predictions I show you when you shoot. Then keep practicing until you learn to picture accurate trajectories yourself. It wasn't a trick, but it was advice. Alpha beamed reassuringly as she added, *You're definitely improving; I guarantee it. So don't rush, and keep up the good work.*

Akira believed her. He had no hope otherwise, but that wasn't the only reason—the trust they had built up lent weight to her words. So he shook off his gloom and grinned back at her. *All right*, he said. *I guess everyone would be a sharpshooter if it was that easy.*

That's the spirit. Slow and steady wins the race.

Akira got back in his rented car and hurried on ahead, leaving only the monster's corpse behind him.

Alpha, are you sure this is the right place? Akira asked, taking a doubtful look around at what was supposedly their destination.

It was definitely in the data we got at Higaraka, she replied.

An awkward silence hung between them.

We're looking for undiscovered ruins, Akira recapped. *So we're checking every place Lion's Tail listed a branch or terminal outside of a*

known ruin, since that's our best bet. And this is our first stop. Have I got that right?

You do.

Nondescript wasteland stretched ahead of Akira. Any structures that once stood there had long crumbled to rubble, which the elements had broken down into fine dust. Decomposing human and monster corpses enriched the soil; plants sprouted in their wake. The few remaining vestiges of civilization had decayed too completely to qualify as buildings.

I guess I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up, he said. *Now that I think about it, if ruins were this easy to find, other hunters would've beaten me to them ages ago.* Yet he wasn't quite ready to give up. *Can you narrow down the location any further? This place is too big to search at random, but I might find something if I knew where to look.*

Just a second. Alpha fell silent, then pointed to the coordinates the data indicated. *There.*

When Akira turned to look, she displayed an arrow to mark the place in his vision. It pointed to empty air.

Any chance there's an invisible building there, covered in active camo or something? he asked, without enthusiasm.

Nope. Well, nothing to see here! On to the next one! Alpha spoke hurriedly in an effort to save face.

Akira grinned, amused but not resentful. The problem was simple: most of the Old World's sprawling cities had eroded into empty wastes, and this place was no exception. Ruins were merely rare areas that had remained relatively intact for one reason or another.

They put that failure behind them and set out for their next destination.

None of the other sites they visited yielded better results. Akira sighed each time he saw an arrow pointing to empty air or bare ground. Then he moved on to the next spot on their list. His spirits fell as the string of failures whittled away at the high hopes he'd set out with.

We're drawing nothing but blanks, huh? Alpha said, keeping her tone upbeat out of concern for Akira. *What now? We could always give up on looking for undiscovered ruins and start checking known ones.*

Even in the ruins other hunters had found before them, she explained, Lion's Tail branches and terminals could still be useful as guides to out-of-

the-way and overlooked areas. Checking such places was far more likely to turn up troves of valuable relics than a normal search of the ruins.

Akira wavered for a moment, but he didn't change his mind. *No, let's focus on looking for fresh ruins for now. This info wasn't easy to come by, so I want to make the most of it.*

All right, Alpha agreed. *I hope we find a ruin at the next place.*

Me too, although it'd suck if it turned out to be full of monsters.

Who knows how many or what kinds of threats live in undiscovered ruins? No hunters have been there to collect data. We'll have to give up if we run into anything you can't handle, so let's hope any monsters are on your level.

Couldn't you guide me past them without a fight?

I'll try, of course, but there are limits. As I've mentioned before, my support is at its best in Kuzusuhara; I can't do as much for you in other ruins. Remember?

Oh, that's right. I almost forgot. Akira frowned.

My scouting abilities take an especially big hit, and even I can only be so precise working through your scanner. You'll run a much higher risk of monsters spotting you before you notice them. So don't expect exploring other ruins to go as smoothly as you're used to.

Got it. I'll be careful. Akira steeled himself. Alpha's support had brought an average slum kid back from the ruins alive, and he understood what losing much of her protection would mean.

And if we do find a new ruin, you won't be able to explore it in your rental car, Alpha added. *Its logs might give away your discovery's location. If the car stays parked in one spot for a long time and the hunter who rented it sells a big haul of relics, it wouldn't take a genius to put two and two together.*

Meaning I'll need my own car to make the trip? But renting's the best I can do for now.

Even if you buy one, you'll still have to worry about problems like parking space. And you're still living out of hotels. Ideally, I'd like you to rent a property with a garage, buy a car built for the wasteland, and—if you have funds left over—install long-range scanners in it. That will make it easier to avoid monsters and reduce the risk of anyone tailing you.

Yeah, but how much will all that cost? Hunting sure is expensive, and it's

a toss-up whether you'll earn more than you spend. Akira let out a sigh as he contemplated the harsh realities of his profession.

It stops being a gamble when you're fully prepared, Alpha reassured him, laughing. *With the right gear, the right skills, and me on your side, you'll do fine. That's worked out for you so far, hasn't it?*

Akira took a moment to reflect, then perked up. *Good point*, he said, with a chuckle. *I'm counting on you.*

You won't regret it. Alpha beamed confidently.

In fact, Akira had been gambling since the day he met her. In the game of hunting, where he needed to ante up more than his life, he was on an unbroken winning streak. But the past was no guarantee of the future. He knew that, and he still kept hunting, and he wouldn't stop until he won big or lost everything.

Akira and Alpha continued their search for unknown ruins, but without success. Considering how long it would take to drive back to the city, they only had time for one more stop. And that last stop turned out to be another unremarkable stretch of wasteland. The whole area was buried in rubble.

Alpha, do your thing, Akira said. He had resigned himself to believing that the whole trip was a failure, but he still wanted to make certain.

There it is. She pointed, and an arrow appeared to mark the spot in his augmented vision.

He looked at it in surprise. The transparent marker was below the surface. *Underground?* he asked.

It looks like it.

Akira took another look around, but he saw no sign of an entrance in the field of rubble. *Does that data say anything about a way in?*

I was only able to get the coordinates. They were probably all people needed to look up directions at the time. The underground facilities might have collapsed too, but if they're intact, we've found an untouched ruin.

Yeah, but we can't explore it without a way in.

Do you want to look for one?

Akira considered. *No, let's call it a day. We came here in a rental car, so if this really is an undiscovered ruin, taking the time to find an entrance might clue in whoever checks the logs, right? We can poke around for that once I've got a car of my own.*

I agree. Let's head home for now.

Akira hadn't discovered a new ruin yet, but he had found where one might be. He consoled himself with that as he drove back to the city.

At his hotel once more, Akira took a soak in the tub. His face relaxed as his accumulated fatigue dissolved into the hot bathwater. As always, Alpha appeared in the tub beside him. Only steam and water masked the almost mystical allure of her naked form, and even the wavering patterns they formed were enchanting. But Akira showed no interest. Once again, he was squandering the luxury of bathing with a woman of literally impossible beauty.

An incoming message lit up his terminal's screen. He'd left the device out in the room, but it was under Alpha's control, so she knew exactly what the message said.

Akira, she announced, *the Hunter Office has a job for you.*

"Really?" he asked.

You've come a long way as a hunter if they're asking for you by name. Normally, I'd congratulate you, but the details kind of put a damper on things.

"What kind of job?" Akira's mind had been fading into the bath, but he snapped alert at Alpha's warning.

Basically, they're planning to wipe out the Yarata scorpion nests in Kuzusuhara Ruins, and they want you to join in.

"Okay, let's pass," Akira responded without hesitation. Any hunter would normally welcome a direct offer from the Office. But after his battle in that building in Kuzusuhara, and the fighting that dogged his retreat, he could muster no enthusiasm for a scorpion hunt.

Alpha, however, shook her head. *It's a problem because you can't refuse so easily. The client is Kugamayama City's Department of Long-Term Strategy.*

The DLS was tasked with supporting the city's growth. Turning down a job from them might earn him an unfavorable reputation for being uncooperative with municipal projects. And getting in his home city's bad books could mean trouble. If he refused, he would need to give a good reason.

Of course, you could always move to another city if the worst happens,

Alpha added. *But I wouldn't say it's worth going that far to dodge this job, would you?*

Akira groaned. He wanted to refuse, but he didn't want to turn the city against him, and he wasn't eager to move either. "What would I have to do to turn them down without a fuss?" he asked. "What if I told them I'd take the job on certain conditions, then asked for something they'd never agree to?"

The problem would be what to ask for. Your request would need to be reasonable, but still something they'd rather rescind their offer than sign off on.

Akira and Alpha discussed their options. Simply demanding an outrageous sum for his services might get him out of the job, but it was also guaranteed to incur the city's displeasure. After hashing it out, they settled on the following conditions:

First, to compensate for his inexperience, Akira would need to use a large quantity of proprietary CWH cartridges and other expensive ammunition. His client would cover ammo costs in advance.

Second, he would operate as part of a team but reserve the right to take independent action whenever he saw fit. This would include the freedom to retreat.

Third, he would be paid based on the number and type of monsters he killed. He would not be penalized financially for retreat or other unenterprising behavior.

He concluded his response with an excuse: He had struggled to deal with the scorpions during their previous encounter. So, unfortunately, he would require this level of preferential treatment to perform the work asked of him.

"Do you think I overdid it? I did ask for an awful lot," Akira wondered nervously. But he had already sent his reply; it was too late to take anything back.

You couldn't help it, Alpha replied, with a reassuring smile. *They might have just agreed if you lowered the bar. Let's hope they don't get too angry when they reject you.*

"I guess you're right." Akira immersed himself in the tub, soaking as he wished the whole thing would blow over without a fuss.

The next morning, he read a message on his terminal with shock and alarm.

"You've gotta be kidding," he muttered.

The Department of Long-Term Strategy had accepted all his conditions for the scorpion elimination job.

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Akira entered Cartridge Freak as soon as it opened and went straight up to the counter.

"Shizuka," he said gravely, "if I told you I needed CWH proprietary cartridges in bulk, how many could you sell me right now?"

"How many?" she repeated incredulously. "How many do you need, exactly?"

"All I can carry, for a start. I've got a powered suit, so I'm planning to stuff my backpack full of them. And I'd like to keep as much more in reserve as I can."

Shizuka sensed something suspicious behind Akira's request. "Why do you suddenly need so much proprietary ammo for your anti-materiel rifle?" she asked, concerned. "What in the world are you planning to fight?"

"Yarata scorpions. It's kind of complicated, but..."

Shizuka's frown deepened as Akira explained his situation.

"Yarata scorpion nests," she murmured when he was done. "The threat an individual monster poses varies, even within a species, so I can see why they gave you the go-ahead to use expensive ammo if the plan is to completely wipe them out. And given that your requests went through, this nest must be quite large and full of scorpions stronger than the ones you fought before."

"So that's what I'm up against, huh?" Akira groaned, wishing that he'd made more unreasonable demands.

Shizuka felt a little sorry for him, but she told herself business came first. "I understand," she said gravely. "I'll do my best to help you procure ammunition. But let me confirm one thing first: You said that your client will cover ammo costs, but what's your specific arrangement with them? Stocking up on that much proprietary ammo isn't cheap, so I'll need payment up front. I am running a business, after all."

In her heart, she wanted to sell Akira the ammunition even if she had to wait for payment. But she could have real trouble on her hands if she gave him special treatment and her other customers found out. And as a businesswoman, Shizuka couldn't allow that.

"That won't be a problem," Akira promptly answered. "It's set up so that my client will reimburse me for ammo costs when you charge them to my account. Please include the ID code for this job in the bill."

If he ran out on the job after the client paid his bills, the Hunter Office would naturally treat those reimbursements as debt. Collection would be swift, certain, and forceful, and would certainly end badly for him. But Akira had made up his mind, so, as someone who did business with hunters, Shizuka's duty was to do all she could to ensure he came back alive.

"I understand," she said, giving him a kind, encouraging smile. "Wait a moment while I get it ready for you. Oh, and I assume you'll bring your AAHs too?"

"Yes," Akira replied. "After all, I went through the trouble of modding them, and I might run into other monsters."

"In that case, switch them over entirely to overpressure ammo. I'll bring you the most powerful type an AAH can fire. You'll get reimbursed for that too, right?"

"That should be fine."

"I normally don't recommend these because, while they are powerful, they're also expensive, and they'll definitely shorten your weapon's life span. But this doesn't seem like the time to worry about things like that. So, when do you leave?"

"They're already bugging me to hurry up, so I'll get going as soon as I'm set for ammo."

"I see. I'll make this quick." With that, Shizuka left to fetch the goods he'd requested from the back room.

Akira completed his final preparations. He bought all the CWH proprietary cartridges and AAH overpressure ammo Shizuka had on hand. After fully loading his weapons, he stashed as much of the remainder as he could fit into his backpack. The ammunition weighed so much that even walking would have been a challenge without his suit-enhanced strength and Alpha maintaining his balance.

Shizuka stood in front of him to deliver a last reminder: "This goes

without saying, but don’t do anything crazy. Is that clear?”

“Of course,” Akira replied.

She gave him a firm, tender hug. The difference in their heights meant that his face ended up buried in her chest. But as much as the embrace startled him, her warmth and the sound of her heartbeat calmed his nerves even more.

Shizuka squeezed a little tighter. She couldn’t tell Akira not to go. Instead, in a soft, caring tone, she said, “Make sure you come back.”

Firmly, and with a hint of joy, Akira responded, “I will.”

Chapter 40: The Children of Checkpoint Fourteen

Once Akira finished gearing up to exterminate the scorpion nests, he got on his motorbike and drove straight to the temporary base at Kuzusuhara. There he received his work terminal and an explanation of his duties:

"Your job is to wipe out Yarata scorpion nests. We've already sent you the details, so I'll assume you've read them and make this quick. The terminal we loan you will guide you to your work site. Once you get there, do whatever your supervisor tells you."

"Is the route there safe?" Akira asked. "I don't want to go alone if there's scorpions on the way. That's supposed to be in my contract."

"Don't worry—we'd take care of any threats like that first thing. Of course, you still might run into a few stragglers from a swarm. But you signed on to take out whole nests, so you should be able to handle that on your own. Call us on your terminal and turn back if things get dicey."

"Got it." That seemed fair enough to Akira.

As he left the base, Alpha piped up with an instruction. *Connect that terminal to yours. I'll set it up to work with me.*

Are you sure? Akira asked. *It's on loan, remember?* He had no problem with Alpha taking over his own devices and modifying them to suit herself, but doing the same to borrowed equipment seemed like crossing a line.

Don't worry. Alpha smiled reassuringly. *It already supports linking for hunters who prefer to use their own terminals. I'll just be taking advantage of the feature.*

Well, I guess that's fine, then. Convinced, Akira hooked up the terminals.

Now Alpha could spy on data from his work device as well.

Akira looked up at his destination, the crumbling remains of a skyscraper. Such structures dotted the Kuzusuhara outskirts, and he couldn't suppress a grimace when he pictured their interiors teeming with scorpions.

So, this place is a Yarata scorpion nest? he asked.

No, Alpha replied.

It's not? But this is *where I'm supposed to go, right?*

This is just the entrance. I detect other people inside, so let's get moving.

They found other hunters and municipal workers in the large hall that made up most of the building's first floor. The official in charge spotted Akira enter and motioned for him to come closer. A disgruntled scowl twisted the man's face once he got a good look at the newcomer.

"You *are* a hunter hired for the Yarata scorpion extermination, right?" he asked.

"That's right."

"*Another* kid?" The official didn't even bother to hide his annoyance. "I'm gonna have to put in a strongly worded request for some decent personnel."

I don't even want to be here, Akira griped inwardly. *Don't hire me if you don't want me.* But he knew this official hadn't been the one to ask for him, so he pretended not to mind.

"Oh well," the man said. "Pick your poison: security or recon."

"I'll take whatever's easier."

"You trying to be funny?" The official fixed Akira with an angry glare.

"I'm deadly serious," Akira replied, with a hint of a scowl. "If I get a choice, I want the safest, simplest option. I can't tell which one that is, so I'm asking someone who knows the situation here inside and out to pick for me."

The official glared at Akira for a little while longer, but Akira stared back, unfazed. At last, the man gave a dismissive grunt and said, "Fine, I'll assign you to security. All you've gotta do is keep an eye on areas we've already secured. It's so easy, even a kid could do it."

The man tapped his terminal and began processing the assignment. In the process, he scanned the newcomer's work terminal. "Akira, hunter rank twenty," he recited spitefully. "Awfully high for a kid. Guess you've been hiding behind a babysitter to work your way up."

Akira shrugged. "Think what you want."

His attitude put the official in an even worse mood, but his assignment had just gone through, so the man gave another snort and didn't bother to needle him further. "Head to Checkpoint Fourteen. Your terminal will show

you the way. Get going."

"Sure thing." Akira set off.

"Cocky brat," the official muttered as he watched the boy go. "I don't know what syndicate he's with, but if they're gonna send kids with inflated ranks, the least they could do is throw in a babysitter. I bet his combat record's a joke. Let's see..."

He patched into the Hunter Office site on his terminal and brought up Akira's records. The boy's combat history wasn't public, but a few more taps got him the information anyway. The Department of Long-Term Strategy had strong ties to the Office. Any reasonably high-ranking staff member had the authority to view private information about hunters below a certain rank who accepted municipal jobs like this one.

Many hunters kept their failures private so as to present a sterling resume to the public, and this official often got a laugh out of perusing their full records. He'd looked down on Akira, assuming the boy's hidden combat history promised more of the same. But after one look at the records on his screen, he turned and stared at the retreating figure in slack-jawed amazement.

A slum child. A rank-one hunter. Reaching rank twenty in only a few months. Risking his life for a large contingent of hunters during the defense of Kugamayama City. Rescuing another stranded group from a Yarata scorpion swarm while helping set up the temporary base. And he'd done almost all of it solo. No sign of affiliation with a hunter syndicate like Druncam, or even working with a team. According to his record, Akira was a cut above all the other young hunters the official had mocked.

It was *too* good. Had the record been tampered with?

"Wh-Who is that guy?" the official muttered.

Despite Akira's unbelievable record, the official didn't admire his skill. Instead he felt awe, as if before some terrifying mystery.

Akira followed his work terminal's navigation to a shutter set in the wall of the large room. The metal bars blocked the stairs to the underground, and his route continued down them.

A basement? he wondered.

The scorpion nests should be underneath the ruins, Alpha informed him.

Kuzusuhara has an underground level? I had no idea.

A man waiting by the shutter saw Akira approaching and pressed a nearby control panel. The bars opened jerkily, closing again as soon as Akira stepped through. The clang of metal striking the floor made him feel cut off from the outside world. It was unsettling.

Akira paused at the head of the stairs and shot a suspicious look at a large quantity of explosives set in place around him.

"Those bombs are our insurance," the man explained, noticing his confusion. "We'll detonate them if monsters push their way up from below and we're forced to abandon the building. Blowing this place will stop scorpions from swarming out onto the surface. A kick won't set the bombs off, but try not to step on them."

Akira pulled a face and turned to ask, "What'll happen to us if you use this 'insurance'?"

"If you do your jobs right, you'll be evacuated or dead by the time that happens," the man said flippantly. He chuckled, but Akira knew he spoke only the truth.

The boy sighed, then set off down the stairs.

Other hunters had already set lights all along the route, revealing underground corridors long submerged in darkness. Rows of ruined shops, which still seemed to vie for attention, made it easy to imagine how alive the area had been in its heyday. Yet it was now a den of monsters adapted to subterranean night. The labyrinthine halls and the beasts that roamed them made relic hunting here far more difficult than in the ruins above.

Akira stuck to the lighted corridors, where hunters had already made a cursory sweep and secured a modicum of safety. Even so, he was in more danger down here than he would have been on the surface. Alpha explained his job to him as he walked. He'd gotten a basic overview earlier, but it couldn't hurt to talk over his security duties in detail.

The hunters hired to end the scorpion infestation operated in three main teams: reconnaissance, extermination, and security. The reconnaissance team was tasked with locating threats in the underground facilities. They went through the lightless halls with a fine-tooth comb, mapping the area and pinpointing scorpion nests. Expert scouts made up the bulk of this force.

The extermination team was responsible for eliminating monsters. They

annihilated nests, expanded the boundaries of the safe zone, and provided the other teams with covering fire. Most of its members were combat specialists.

The security team's job was to guard designated locations, like communication relays and key defensive positions, and they also performed odd jobs like installing lights. The work was simpler, safer, and less demanding than the other teams', so the hunters assigned to it were those who might uncharitably be called "leftovers." Alpha added that, given its location, Akira's posting was probably a relay of no particular importance. The news brought a smile to his face.

You mean it really might be so easy even a kid can do it? he said brightly. *I guess it never hurts to ask.*

Akira, Alpha cautioned, *I shouldn't have to tell you this, but don't let your guard down.*

I know, I know. I'm just glad it seems easier than I expected. The client agreed to so much I got nervous wondering how hard this was gonna be.

I hope you're right about that. Alpha's expression suggested she doubted it.

Akira shot her a questioning look, clearly uneasy and annoyed. *Alpha, if you're just trying to scare me into staying alert, stop—I promise I'll take my job seriously. Or is something actually worrying you?*

Hmm, how about the bad luck of a certain someone who got attacked by two hordes of monsters in one day, tried to answer an emergency listing alone and on foot in the wasteland, and got chased by scorpions in the middle of a rescue mission?

Akira grimaced. His luck *was* bad, and he knew Alpha was reminding him not to do anything that would make it worse. *Then I'll try my best to make sure things never come down to luck*, he said at last, forcing a smile.

Good idea, Alpha responded, with a mischievous grin. *And let's hope your luck doesn't get too bad for my support to handle.*

A communications relay sat in a large, well-lit space where multiple subterranean corridors met. Eight bored-looking hunters kept watch over the equipment. This was Akira's post: Checkpoint Fourteen.

The moment Akira set foot in the intersection, he froze in surprise—then leaped back instinctively. That's what he'd had to do the *last* time he'd seen

a woman dressed as a maid, back in the Higaraka Ruins. But unlike that one, this figure remained visible even after he left the spot where he'd first seen her. Akira started to panic.

Alpha! I see another maid! he shouted. *And she doesn't disappear when I move!*

Calm down, Alpha told him. *You have nothing to worry about.*

What? Oh, that's right—you're running a "filter" or something for me. Akira breathed a sigh of relief, but his explanation didn't satisfy Alpha.

No, my filter has nothing to do with it. That isn't augmented reality.

What do you mean? Akira asked hesitantly.

I mean she's real. She's actually standing there.

Akira had been staring at Alpha in spite of himself. Now, still shocked, he slowly turned back to the intersection. He even checked his scanner's display, just to be sure. But his eyes, his equipment, and Alpha all agreed—the woman was really there.

◆

"Our reinforcement's *another* brat? What the hell are the bosses thinking?" groaned Mimata, a hunter working security at Checkpoint Fourteen. He looked none too pleased with Akira's arrival.

"Probably that this place is so safe even brats can handle it. Just enjoy the easy gig," his buddy quipped to calm him down. "Still, did you see how he nearly jumped out of his skin?"

"'Cause he's too green to handle surprises." Mimata gave a mocking laugh at Akira's expense. "Of course, she gave us a start too."

"You said it." The pair looked over at the woman dressed like a maid. "I hear Druncam spoils its rookies, but I never thought I'd see one with a personal attendant. I don't know how much that costs, but they've gotta be spending everything their veterans make on those kids."

"I hear the friction between their newbies and old hands is getting worse, and I can see why." Mimata and his buddy shared a laugh.

◆

Akira's behavior upon entering Checkpoint Fourteen rubbed Reina the

wrong way.

"What an overreaction," the girl grumbled, scowling.

A woman in a maid outfit stood out like a sore thumb in the desolate ruins. And this one was a beauty, so the average hunter could be forgiven for mistaking her for an Old World hologram. She was so out of place as to seem unreal. Reina understood that—she expected surprised reactions, and she was seldom disappointed. But Akira's shock still struck her as overdone. She was so used to the maid's uniform, partly from seeing it worn in its proper context, that his performance seemed like mockery.

Which did nothing to improve her mood.

The looks people gave Reina and the woman—after they got over their surprise—were varied, but seldom pleasant. Now, with Mimata's team already sneering at them, Reina felt mounting irritation.

"Shiori, I know I've said this before, but won't you wear something else?" she demanded, glaring as she vented her displeasure on the woman who was its root cause.

"I respectfully decline," Shiori—the woman in the maid outfit—calmly replied. "You needn't concern yourself, miss; I don't mind."

"Well, I do!"

"In that case, might I suggest that you strive to regain your social standing as soon as possible? That should alleviate your worries. I will do my utmost to assist you."

"Humph! Who knows if we'll ever pull *that* off!" Reina snapped. Then her face twisted with self-disgust as she realized she'd gone too far. "Sorry. I shouldn't have lashed out at you."

She knew how hard Shiori was working to make their dream a reality. The woman stayed with her now not out of duty or obligation, but purely out of concern for her. Reina hung her head, regretting her outburst of a moment before.

"Don't mind me, miss," Shiori said kindly. "If it helps you to feel better, please proceed."

Reina forced herself to look up and smile, touched. "Thanks, Shiori." Then a puzzled look clouded her face. "But if you're willing to go that far, can't you *please* choose a different outfit? I mean, that's not even armored, is it? What do you wear it for?"

"For a number of reasons, on which I decline to elaborate."

Reina let out another deep sigh. For all her constant attentiveness, Shiori would never willingly ditch her maid outfit. Or even explain why she was so attached to it.

◆

Once Alpha explained that Shiori wasn't a ghost of the Old World, Akira got over his panic—although not his surprise—and entered the checkpoint.

"Hey," Mimata called to him. "What's your hunter rank?"

"Twenty," he answered.

The hunter's look of mingled irritation and disgust made it plain that he was not impressed. That self-reported rank, on top of Akira's gear and the first impression he'd made, was all Mimata had needed to finish sizing up the boy. "Another farm-raised kid?" he practically spat. "Why the hell do we keep getting brats here? Just try to stay out of our way."

"Farm-raised" was an insult aimed at hunters who rose to ranks higher than their skills deserved, thanks to disproportionately high-end gear, expert backup, or other forms of outside assistance. Many young hunters affiliated with large syndicates fit this bill, so others sometimes mocked them as phonies raised only to boost their organizations' overall standing. Akira wasn't familiar with the term, though he could guess what it meant from Mimata's tone. But he didn't seem to mind—he knew he wouldn't be where he was without Alpha's support.

"Are you in charge here?" Akira asked.

"No one's in charge here," Mimata answered, not bothering to hide his contempt. "Picking a leader out of this ragtag bunch would just cause more problems, and I don't plan on sticking my neck out for any of you. Go join those guys if you want a babysitter."

Akira took a look at the group the man pointed to. "All right," he said—then walked away from both them and Mimata and sat down alone. That drew surprised looks from the other hunters, but he paid them no mind.

Are you sure you don't want to link up with them? Alpha asked.

Yeah, he answered. *I'll go over if you tell me to, but I've got a feeling I'll get into less trouble this way.*

Alpha took a look at the other group, then turned back to Akira with a rueful grin. *Good point. Let's keep our distance.*

The team Mimata had pointed out was Katsuya's.

The eight hunters assigned to Checkpoint Fourteen were now divided three ways as they stood guard: Akira, Mimata and his buddy, and Katsuya's team of five. Katsuya, Yumina, Airi, Reina, and Shiori were all working together—the main reason why the men had marked the children as "farm-raised." The older pair was already prejudiced against young hunters, and they readily assumed that the one adult in a group of children was a babysitter minding her less-skilled charges. They were wrong about that, but they could be forgiven for their mistake, since Shiori was genuinely a cut above her companions.

Both Mimata's and Katsuya's groups chatted to ease their boredom. Time passed uneventfully, and their tension dissipated. As long as they took basic precautions, like keeping an eye on their scanners, they weren't likely to suffer a surprise attack.

So far, this job really was so easy a child could do it.

Akira passed the time studying and talking with Alpha. Growing up in the slums had left him with poor literacy and worse education. Without that foundational knowledge to build on, he couldn't learn what a successful hunter needed to know. So he spent his free moments trying to plug the many gaps in his education.

Suddenly, Alpha glanced to one side. Akira turned and saw Katsuya and Reina splitting off from their group and heading toward him. Reina marched straight up to him with Katsuya and Shiori in tow.

"What's your name?" she asked sharply, looking down at him where he sat.

"Akira," he replied.

"Why are you off on your own? Come join us."

"No thanks. I'm good where I am."

Reina furrowed her brows. "Why? Do you think you can get away with slacking off if you stay here alone?"

"I'm not slacking off, and I don't plan to."

"Stop lying. You've just been sitting there quietly this whole time."

Katsuya's and Mimata's groups had been standing guard in shifts. Akira hadn't even been doing that bare minimum—at least as far as anyone else could see. From that perspective, Reina's reproach seemed justified. But

Akira remained unruffled.

"I've been using my scanner to scout a wide area," he said. "I noticed as soon as you started to head over here, didn't I?"

Strictly speaking, it was Alpha who had been doing all the scouting. At his words, she gave him a smirk, although he pretended not to notice.

Reina looked more annoyed than ever. But she couldn't argue with Akira's logic, so she tried a different tack. He *would* obey her.

"What's your hunter rank?" she demanded.

"Twenty."

"Mine's twenty-*three*!" Reina announced, a little smugly.

A brief silence followed. Akira didn't respond, and his attitude remained exactly as before—not at all the reaction Reina had expected. She started looking annoyed again.

"Hey, are you listening?!" she snapped. "My hunter rank is twenty-three! Higher than yours!"

"So?" asked Akira.

"What do you mean, 'so'?! I outrank you, so do as I say! Stand up and come join us!"

"No. No one told me to shut up and obey any hunter with a higher rank, and it's not in my contract either. I've got no obligation to listen to you."

"Obligation has nothing to do with it!" Reina yelled sharply.

Katsuya stepped in before she got any more heated. "Erm... Listen, I know she doesn't act like it, but deep down, she's just worried about you. You'll be safer in a group if something goes wrong, you know?" He chose his words carefully, both to avoid offending Akira and to pacify Reina.

He accomplished neither.

"I'm not the least bit worried about him!" Reina snapped, turning her anger on Katsuya.

"Don't worry about me," Akira replied indifferently. "I'll deal with problems on my own. And if worse comes to worst, just let me die."

"Come on," Katsuya pressed, startled but not ready to give up. "We'll still have better odds if we stick together."

"Forget it! Let him die alone if that's what he wants!" Reina snapped, then stalked off to rejoin her group. Her quick stride made her anger obvious, even from behind. Shiori left with her.

Katsuya watched her go, then shifted his gaze to Akira. The other boy

had already turned away, as if to say the conversation was over. Katsuya would have liked to ask how Akira knew Elena and Sara, among other questions. But he would have to put up with more flak from Reina if he lingered, and Akira didn't seem open to further discussion, so he resigned himself and left too.

Alpha watched Katsuya and Reina depart with a smile. *Well,* they *were certainly lively.*

You can say that again, Akira responded. *I bet they had plenty of "lively" arguments before I got here too.*

He surmised—correctly—that the other hunters must have quarreled, since they'd already been split into two groups when he arrived. How much would they do to support each other if the scorpions attacked now? He concluded, to his dismay, that the two groups would abandon each other—at best. They might even intentionally send stray shots each other's way.

In a worst-case scenario, Akira planned to make a break for it on his own. His contract authorized him to take independent action when he saw fit, and that included retreat. So he wanted to keep his distance from any arguments if he could help it.

Akira frowned and let out a sigh. *And here I thought I'd landed an easy gig.*

You were lucky enough to be assigned to a safe spot, Alpha responded, with an ominous smile. *I hope you'll work hard to make sure it stays that way.*

You don't have to tell me twice.

Akira gloomily assumed that Katsuya's group would start more trouble, never considering that he might stir things up himself. But Alpha thought differently. In her estimation, Akira was the person most likely to trigger a worst-case scenario. He wouldn't just be sending "stray" bullets at others. After all, he hadn't hesitated to kill a man for threatening him and drag the corpse into his enemy's headquarters. So when push came to shove, he was probably the most vicious hunter present.

Alpha decided she still required more data to grasp exactly what made him tick. Behind her smile, she continued to observe him. As she always had and always would.

◆

Time passed peacefully at Checkpoint Fourteen. That was fine by Akira, but those who hoped for bonuses were growing dissatisfied. Their conversation turned to how to make up for the lost hours—and profits. And Mimata's group was nearly done coming up with a plan.

"We've got time to kill, and nothing's happening," the hunter grumbled. "If we were on the recon team, we could pick up relics on the side, but no such luck working security."

"You say that, but are any relics left in the outskirts really worth hunting for?" asked his companion.

"Not above ground, but I hear you can still find good stuff down here."

"Well, I could buy that. I doubt many people bother searching these pitch-black tunnels."

"And you know how wild the defense force went during that attack on the city? Rumor has it the aftermath blew open a path between part of these underground malls and an unexplored zone. That might even be where the scorpions came from."

"Meaning the recon team'll have their pick of relics in virgin territory?"

"Pretty much."

"Who knows how much loot is just lying around in there? Bet it's worth a tidy profit. Shit! Now I wish I was working recon too." Mimata's buddy groaned in frustration.

Mimata's lips twisted into a mirthless grin. "But the way I figure it, the recon guys won't be able to take home relics while they're on the clock—it'd be a breach of contract. The city officials'll confiscate anything they carry out and slap 'em with a stiff penalty. But recon also won't want to just leave their finds lying there. So, what do you think they'll do?"

The other man considered. "In their shoes, I'd hide the relics someplace only I knew about."

"Exactly. So would I. And that means someone might've already cached relics right around here. Wanna take a look?"

The two men smiled at each other, greed sparkling in their eyes.

◆

"Hey!" Reina snapped when she spotted Mimata's group creeping away from the intersection. "Where do you think you're going?!"

“Just a quick patrol of the perimeter,” Mimata answered casually. He made almost no effort to hide what he was really up to—a show of contempt that further incensed Reina.

“What’s the point of that when you could keep an eye on things here?! And besides, patrolling is the reconnaissance team’s job! We’re getting paid to guard this checkpoint! So don’t wander away from your posts—it makes things harder on the rest of us!” Her hostile shout echoed through the subterranean passageways. But it didn’t faze Mimata.

“Don’t sweat it,” he said, still nonchalant. “We’ll be right back. Anyway, we haven’t even *seen* a monster. We’ll at least get a warning if something comes our way.”

“That’s not the point!”

Mimata had looked down at Reina, and she had snapped back at him. Compromise and reconciliation weren’t in the cards. And while all eyes were on the fruitless argument, Mimata recalled the existence of a third party, separate from either faction.

“What do you think?” he called, hoping to rope this outsider into the dispute.

Everyone turned to look at the third party—Akira. Mimata’s gaze was as dismissive as ever, while Reina made no effort to soften her glare. Both wanted him to agree with their own position.

Akira turned the problem over in his mind for a moment before speaking. “If you need a bathroom break, make it quick; I don’t want you doing your business here. But if you take too long to come back, we’ll assume you might have run into monsters and call HQ to check up on you.”

He’d given the men his approval. Reina looked unpleasantly surprised.

“You’re quick on the uptake,” Mimata said, grinning from ear to ear. “Yeah, I need a bathroom break. To tell the truth, I can barely hold it in. See you.” With that, he and his companion left the intersection together.

Reina glared resentfully after them. Once the men were out of sight, however, she rounded on Akira and fixed him with a furious stare. “What was that about?!” she screamed, advancing on the next object of her wrath. “Are you on their side?!”

“Nothing I said would have stopped them,” Akira responded, calm but a little exasperated. “We’re better off letting them do their thing and hurry back. That’s all.”

His indifferent tone rubbed Reina the wrong way. “That’s not the point!” she snapped. “Are you just going to let them do whatever they want?!”

“I’m not authorized to stop them. If you have a problem, tell it to HQ. Or would you rather threaten them into staying at gunpoint? Go right ahead —I won’t stop you.”

In truth, he’d let Mimata’s group go because his position was closer to theirs than to Reina’s. Akira was in no position to criticize the men. He planned to take independent action too if the situation called for it. And he wouldn’t wait for them if headquarters sent an order to retreat, or any other important instructions, while they were gone. It was no skin off his nose if stragglers got left to die in a monster assault—they knew the risks of wandering off on their own.

Akira completely ignored the rest of Reina’s tirade, although it continued for a little while. He’d decided silence would get him into less trouble than continuing to argue. Eventually, Reina realized that nothing she said would get through to him. After one last, furious glare, she rejoined her companions.

Akira sighed. *Would it kill them to not start trouble?*

It’s a question of compatibility, Alpha replied, smirking. The pot had just called the kettle black. *They might just not mesh with you.*

You’re probably right.

Katsuya and the other young hunters wouldn’t be able to function as a team if they all picked fights with *everyone* they met. So Akira concluded that they were just a bad match for people like him or Mimata’s group and let the matter rest.

Chapter 41: A Difference in Skill

While Akira and Katsuya's group stood guard over the spacious intersection, Mimata and his buddy made a series of scouting trips into the surrounding area. Reina called headquarters via the relay, bent on putting a stop to the men's explorations, but the operators wouldn't give her the time of day. Checkpoint Fourteen wasn't important enough for them to bother micromanaging it.

Eventually, Katsuya's group realized that Mimata and his buddy weren't just taking a breather. Reina felt annoyed that the rest of them were dutifully keeping guard while the men neglected their duties to hunt relics.

"Katsuya, why don't we scout the perimeter too?" she suggested as the thought occurred to her, before she'd had a chance to reflect more deeply.

"No." There was no room for compromise in his voice.

Reina scowled. She knew Katsuya was their team leader, and that she had to obey his orders. But she wasn't the kind of person to just accept things, and at the moment she felt frustrated too. "Why not? Why should we be the only ones to put up with this?"

"I know how you feel, but don't let it get to you," Katsuya said. "We decided to operate as a full team whenever possible, to ensure everyone's safety. And there are only eight of us guarding this point. HQ won't turn a blind eye if five of us—seven, if you count those two—abandon our posts. They'll complain to Druncam, and we'll take the rap along with those guys. So, no. We stay here."

Unable to refute his argument, Reina still felt vexed and fell into a disgruntled silence.

Katsuya looked her in the eye, grave yet affectionate, and said, "Besides, I don't wanna let you act like those slackers."

Taken aback, Reina lost steam. Annoyance gave way to thinly disguised embarrassment.

Reina thought highly of Katsuya. In the past, she'd come down hard on him, refusing to acknowledge his ability. But when she'd heard his team

had killed a gluttonous crocodile, she'd challenged them to a mock battle to see what they could do for herself. It had been a slightly unusual matchup—Katsuya's team of three versus Reina's team of two, with Shiori limiting herself to doing the work of two Reinas—but after more than a dozen bouts, Katsuya's team had taken the lead. Unable to accept defeat, Reina had then demanded Katsuya face her one-on-one. She had lost decisively and kept losing until she realized she stood no chance.

Katsuya had risen far in Reina's estimation once she'd acknowledged him as a capable hunter. And given his good looks, her growing affection had not been entirely platonic.

"W-Well, I did promise to follow your orders if you beat me," she said, trying not to show how much his stare disconcerted her. "I'll let it go for now."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Katsuya smiled. The attention from an attractive boy her own age, one who had earned her respect, made Reina even more flustered.

Inwardly, Katsuya breathed a sigh of relief. Out of the corner of his eye, he'd seen Yumina grin and brandish a fist at him. Now she lowered her hand, but he knew exactly what would have happened if he'd thoughtlessly gone along with Reina's suggestion.

Shiori spoke up. "Miss, please try not to bother Mr. Katsuya too much. I also cannot approve of carelessly wandering these halls. I hope you understand that both Mr. Katsuya and I are thinking of your safety."

"I...I know that," Reina mumbled and made no further protest. She couldn't ignore a warning from her trusted attendant who had stayed by her side, protecting her, ever since she'd left home to become a hunter.

"As I advised you earlier, miss, please refrain from unnecessary interactions with strangers. Monsters are far from the only dangers we face. And loath as I am to admit it, I alone cannot fully guarantee your safety. So please avoid speaking to hunters outside of Druncam, as your temperament might easily spark needless conflict. In addition—"

"I understand. Really, I do," Reina cut in, anxious to nip in the bud what promised to be an interminable lecture. "But don't you think you're being a little overprotective?"

"Miss, I realize that I'm repeating myself, but this is the wasteland—a hazardous place completely unlike the walled districts. Please understand

that if you see me as overprotective, that only proves how fatally you underestimate it."

"The wasteland" meant different things to different Easterners. Generally, the term meant everything outside city limits. Barrens, plains, deserts, seas, mountains, sky, and ruins were all lumped together under one label and considered equally dangerous. To some lifelong residents of the urban centers, "wasteland" meant anywhere beyond the shelter of the walls—even the lower districts of their own cities. But this was merely a difference of degree. Wherever the standards of safety one was used to vanished—wherever all that mattered was the ability to kill, whether humans or monsters—there was the wasteland.

Reina knew she was in that danger zone, but she still took it lightly and failed to fully appreciate its threats. She had Shiori to guard her, and they mostly operated in a group with fairly reasonable people like Katsuya's team. This made her safer, but it also hindered her from discovering how much peril she was really in. Shiori realized that, but she couldn't put Reina in harm's way just to teach her a lesson—so she made do with long-winded lectures.

While Reina tired of Shiori's preaching, she didn't lose her temper or talk back. She appreciated the woman's heartfelt concern. Yet she felt she would miss her chance if she didn't take action now, and that nagging thought made her impatient.

Reina wasn't well-regarded within Druncam. Young hunters were looked down on at the best of times, and she always worked with Shiori, her very own ultra-capable babysitter. Her rank had steadily increased, but no one respected her skill—least of all Reina herself.

Then Katsuya's team had killed the gluttonous crocodile. *That* earned them some recognition, young as they were. Fewer and fewer Druncam hunters dismissed them as children. The team had even impressed Mizuha, one of the syndicate's executives. Katsuya himself had won especially high praise for his work on the temporary base. When the administrators had needed to fill some empty slots on the rescue teams, he alone had been selected while the rest of the Druncam contingent was assigned to secure buildings, and he had saved dozens of fellow hunters unaided.

Reina had gained a new respect for Katsuya too, and she wanted the same for herself. Yarata scorpions weren't as threatening as gluttonous

crocodiles, but they were still fairly powerful monsters. She hoped to distinguish herself in battle against a swarm of them, thus proving her ability to herself and to everyone else.

Now Druncam had dispatched Katsuya's group to join in the operation, highlighting their crocodile-slaying and Katsuya's rescue work. As a result, headquarters had initially assigned them to the extermination team. But officials on the ground had hastily shuffled them off to security duty as soon as it became clear they were mostly children. Reina had lamented the transfer and resented their shabby treatment, but she'd kept her vexation and impatience in check. Surely she would see plenty of combat working security, she told herself. After all, that was why they hired hunters for the job. She would get her chance.

But Checkpoint Fourteen was safety itself. Mimata and his buddy up and left as they pleased, and headquarters couldn't be bothered to stop them: they all assumed that nothing would happen here. And time was passing so uneventfully that Reina found herself agreeing with them.

Is the whole job going to be like this? she wondered. *Won't I get to do* anything *before it's over?*

Hoping for some kind of excitement, she was getting desperate enough to forget the most basic rule of the wasteland: nothing mattered more than safety.

Just then, an announcement blared from the relay in the center of the intersection: "This is HQ. Come in, Checkpoint Fourteen."

Everyone gathered around the device. Mimata, who had been closest, responded, "This is Checkpoint Fourteen."

"Do you have anything to report?" asked the voice from headquarters.

"Nothing but peace and quiet."

A brief silence followed. Then, "You're 147, aren't you? I hear you've been making frequent trips away from your post. Are you sure there's been nothing out of the ordinary?"

"Don't be such a stick in the mud. My buddy and I just went for a piss. We can't risk going alone, and we can't help it if we don't have to go at the same time." Mimata offered perfunctory excuses, figuring the jig was up and it was time to end his covert searches. Everyone assumed the two men's excursions had finally gotten too frequent for headquarters to overlook.

But such was not the case.

“Save it. Did you encounter Yarata scorpions or any sign of them while you were on the move?”

“No, nothing like that. Is there a problem?”

“A swarm attacked Checkpoint Fifteen. They fought it off without casualties, but we’re worried—the attack came from a zone we’d deemed secure. Maybe the recon team just got careless, and a passage was less sealed than they thought—but the scorpions may have opened a new route by breaking down a weak wall or widening the gaps in some rubble.”

This news changed the mood at Checkpoint Fourteen.

“So you want us to watch out in case they hit here too?” Mimata asked.

“Negative,” the voice responded. “We want you to reinvestigate the area. Send out a small team to check for any changes since we mapped that section of the underground. If you find a new passage, we’ll send in the recon or extermination team.”

Mimata exchanged a look with his partner. A new passage might lead to unexplored territory full of untouched relics. “Roger that. We’ll leave to scout it out immediately,” he said assertively.

“Negative,” came the immediate response. “You two stay put and guard the checkpoint. I know you’ll half-ass it and start rooting around for relics.”

“Oh, come on. We wouldn’t—”

“Spare me the excuses and don’t move from that spot.”

Mimata clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“It serves you right,” Reina chimed in, laughing at him.

Mimata snorted. “Who’re you gonna send, then?” he demanded derisively, eyeing the Druncam group. “There’s no one else here but some brats and their babysitter.”

Katsuya and Reina glared at him, and Yumina and Airi looked miffed as well. Shiori stood silently beside Reina. Akira seemed unconcerned. But the official at headquarters had already made the contentious decision for them.

“We’ll send Twenty-Seven,” the operator announced. “Alone, or with up to two others. Decide who goes with him among yourselves.”

Neither Mimata’s group nor Katsuya’s knew any numbers other than their own. They all looked at each other, unsure who had just been called on.

Then, a new voice spoke up. “Twenty-Seven here. Roger that.”

All eyes focused on the speaker. Twenty-Seven was Akira. He had

already grabbed his backpack and started walking away.

Are you sure you don't want to take anyone with you? Alpha asked him. *You're allowed two teammates.*

I'll go alone, he replied. *I don't want any extra trouble.*

I see your point. Still, it's a waste of all those clauses you added to get out of solo work.

Don't I know it. I'll have to come up with better conditions next time.

Stunned, the other hunters watched Akira's rapid departure with shocked and confused looks. He ignored their gazes and vanished into the corridors beyond the intersection.

Once Akira was out of sight, Mimata snapped back to reality. "Why that kid?" he asked headquarters in disbelief. "Are you sure you didn't mix him up with some other guy?"

"No mistake. Twenty-Seven is our man," the operator flatly replied.

"Why him?" Katsuya cut in. "If you just chose someone at random, we'd prefer to make the decision ourselves." He hoped headquarters would reconsider, worried that setting a precedent of assigning roles randomly could lead to conflict in future jobs.

But the operator shot him down too. "Don't worry: we chose Twenty-Seven for his combat record. You're free to choose the other two."

Katsuya couldn't hide his shock. It had happened again. This official making the calls at headquarters was probably the same dismissive man up on the ground floor who had hastily reassigned them. And yet he spoke as if he had faith in Akira, another young hunter. Katsuya began trembling, feeling as if he were reliving his first encounter with the other boy.

"His battle record?" Shiori repeated quizzically. "Fifty-Two's team of three successfully hunted a gluttonous crocodile. If you're judging based on past accomplishments, wouldn't they be a better choice?"

"Hunting scorpions isn't the same as hunting crocs," headquarters responded acidly. "I picked Twenty-Seven because his experience is the best match for the current situation, so chill out." Druncam had used its size and connections to enroll many of its rookie hunters in the extermination effort, and this official had to deal with the results, managing a large group whose abilities he couldn't bring himself to trust. So he wasn't particularly impressed with the syndicate, and having these Druncam hunters question

his decision didn't help.

His harsh tone made it clear to his listeners how capable he thought Akira, but Mimata remained unconvinced. "What's that brat—Twenty-Seven—done that's so impressive?"

"Rescued a group of hunters from a building infested by a Yarata scorpion swarm. He killed at least eighty scorpions during their escape. Alone."

"Y-You're kidding, right?" Mimata murmured, voicing what they all felt.

"That info's straight from the Hunter Office; it's no joke. But you don't need to agree; just sit tight and guard that checkpoint."

Airi pondered for a moment. "Katsuya—Fifty-Two—also saved numerous hunters while doing rescue work, besides killing a glutton croc. Doesn't he deserve consideration too?"

"I agree that Fifty-Two's rescue work is impressive, but he has no experience with Yarata scorpions. Those underground corridors resemble the interior of a building, where Twenty-Seven has already fought a scorpion swarm. There's no comparison." The voice on the other end was growing annoyed.

"But Katsuya's team killed a gluttonous crocodile!" Reina objected. "You shouldn't count them out just because they haven't fought scorpions."

The official finally snapped. "Shut up about the damn croc! It's nothing to brag about! Decent hunters kill them all the time! Twenty-Seven bagged one solo!"

That floored Reina. Katsuya had trounced her one-on-one, but even with Yumina and Airi's help, he had only barely managed to kill a crocodile. She simply couldn't believe a boy her own age had hunted one alone. She wanted details, but the voice from headquarters kept going before she could ask.

"Enough nitpicking! Is second-guessing every order Druncam policy?! No more questions! HQ out!" The transmission cut off.

Everyone left in the checkpoint—both Mimata's group and Katsuya's—stared at each other in stunned silence.

The shock galvanized Reina. She had sensed that Katsuya saw Akira as something like a rival; after hearing about Akira's combat record, she felt convinced she'd been right. She respected Katsuya, and Akira was

Katsuya's rival—so maybe she stood to gain something by tagging along with Akira. Maybe this was her chance to prove herself.

So intensely did she long for this opportunity that she cast aside any thought of safety—the most valuable commodity in the wasteland—and wished for danger.

"We can still send out two more scouts, right?" she asked finally.

"Miss?!" Shiori exclaimed, guessing her meaning.

"Shiori, we're going after him."

Reina had made her choice. And no matter how much, or how little, thought she'd given it, she would have to live with the consequences. As yet, she hardly knew what that meant.

◆

The underground had always been a labyrinth, and collapsed corridors and other blockages made it even trickier to navigate. Nevertheless, Akira traversed it in relative safety thanks to the map on his work terminal and the communication relays, which allowed him to check his position.

The recon team, which had set up these conveniences, had naturally done without them. The map of the subterranean passages, the fruit of their labors, had proved invaluable for predicting monster attack routes and positioning checkpoints. But if Yarata scorpions broke through a wall and created a new avenue of attack, the territory the team had painstakingly secured would cease to be safe. No one had confirmed any new incursions yet, but the mere possibility made the halls Akira walked riskier.

He paused once he got a certain distance from Checkpoint Fourteen. Wandering around at random wouldn't make for much of a patrol, so he began hashing out a plan with Alpha.

What should we do next? Maybe head toward Checkpoint Fifteen? he asked.

What makes you say that? she inquired.

If any scorpions survived their attack on Checkpoint Fifteen, they might go back the way they came. And if they're injured, their blood on the floor might give us a trail to follow.

Not a bad plan. Any other reason?

Let me think. Akira reflected. *I guess I could take shelter at the*

checkpoint if I run into more scorpions than I can handle over that way. They already fought off an attack with no casualties, so it should be safer than Fourteen.

Very good, especially that last part, Alpha responded, smiling.

Do you think Checkpoint Fourteen's dangerous? Akira asked nervously.

It wasn't exactly on high alert, and the personnel were already infighting. Who knows how effectively they'd be able to deal with an attack? You're obviously better off with a group that's already proven itself.

Makes sense, Akira agreed. (He had no right to talk, given that he'd chosen to make himself a third faction in the conflict, but he chose to ignore that detail.) While he wouldn't go out of his way to save a comrade, he wanted to be enough of a team player to make sure they didn't sabotage each other—and that no one shot him in the back. Having to worry about "stray" bullets when he already had monsters to contend with didn't appeal to him.

Let's get going, Alpha suggested. *And navigate without my support—it will be good practice.*

Is now really the time for training?

Absolutely. And I'll be running my own scans in the background, so this will be practice for me too.

It will? Akira asked, surprised. He had vaguely assumed that Alpha didn't need to train like he did.

Alpha smiled. *Yes. I'll test how far my support can take you with your current gear and see what I can do to help you more. To tell the truth, my scouting abilities are significantly reduced at the moment.*

Akira froze. *Wh-What do you mean?* he demanded, trying unsuccessfully to hide his rising panic.

An in-depth explanation would take too long, so I'll be brief. First, I can't detect threats below the Kuzusuhara Ruins as effectively as I can above ground. Second, some building materials and systems in ruins can block scanning. This area has both.

How bad are we talking, exactly?

I'm not telling, but I'm still a far better scout than you or any run-of-the-mill hunter. You can't lump us in the same category. But imagine a dramatic drop in your scanning radius and precision, and that will give you a sense of what it's like for me.

Akira deduced that she wasn't telling because he was better off not knowing. For the first time in a long while, he felt fear—the sensation of treading through an unknown ruin with his teeth clenched, dreading the monsters that might lurk around every corner.

I'll be fine, he said. *Resolve is my burden. Let's go.* He couldn't keep hunting if he let fear paralyze him. But just as he steeled himself and prepared to step forward, Alpha pointed behind him.

Sorry to spoil your moment, Akira, but you have company.

Akira turned around slowly—with caution, but without raising his rifle, as Alpha's tone told him that the new arrivals weren't hostile.

Then his suspicion gave way to puzzlement.

What are they *doing here?* he wondered as he saw Reina and Shiori approaching.

◆

Reina and Shiori caught sight of Akira at almost the same moment he turned to look at them. But Shiori realized that, strictly speaking, Akira had been faster, and she grew warier of him.

They had been behind him—obviously outside his field of view—and too far for him to hear their footsteps. His scanner didn't look powerful enough to detect them at this distance either. And yet, Akira had turned to look directly at them, and Shiori didn't think that was a coincidence. Some of the elite hunters who operated on the Front Line—the extreme eastern border—possessed an inexplicable power to sense gazes and presences they shouldn't be able to. If Akira was similarly gifted, he would be an extraordinarily dangerous enemy.

"Miss," she urged, "perhaps we should still turn back after all."

"No," Reina insisted. "Anyway, leaving as soon as we spot Akira is just about the most suspicious thing we could do. What if he thinks we're planning to ambush him?"

"I believe we can avoid such misunderstandings, as we have no motive for attacking him."

"Hurry up. It looks like he's waiting for us." Reina rushed on ahead. Shiori gave up on convincing her and followed suit.

◆

Akira briefly wondered if he could spare himself future trouble by leaving and shaking the newcomers off his tail, but he dismissed the idea. He wasn't eager to move that quickly through a ruin infested with scorpions that disguised themselves as rubble, especially when Alpha wasn't at her best. And he'd already paused anyway, so he found himself waiting for the women. Reina reached him first.

"There a problem?" he asked, deliberately acting surly.

"We came to scout too," Reina answered.

"Okay. I'll check over that way, so look somewhere else."

"We'll go with you."

Akira lacked the people skills to tell whether Reina had missed his implied refusal or had simply chosen to ignore it, so he gave Shiori a reproving look instead.

"He seems less than enthused by our company, miss," the woman said. "I strongly suggest we withdraw."

Reina immediately scowled, but even she realized starting a shouting match with Akira would do her no favors. She seemed to bite back something, then exhaled and kept her cool—or at least tried to. Anyone could see she'd stopped her anger just short of the boiling point.

"We'll go with you," she repeated, struggling to stay calm. "I can pull my own weight. And even if you don't trust me, you won't regret bringing Shiori."

"Shouldn't I just team up with her, then?" Akira asked.

"Shiori won't stay without me."

"Then go back together."

"We're going with you."

"No. Leave," Akira commanded. He then turned his back on them and walked away, acting for all the world as if they didn't exist.

But after making his way through the subterranean passages for a little while, curiosity got the better of him, and he looked back. Sure enough, Reina and Shiori were following him, keeping as close as they would to a teammate.

Akira turned to face them again and sighed. "What do I have to do to make you go away?" he asked, irritated. "Point a gun at you?"

“I would respond to any such threat with force,” Shiori replied, with a hint of menace. “As we would both sustain unnecessary losses, I don’t recommend it. Please reconsider.” Her gaze was deadly serious, and Akira could sense her determination to protect Reina, even at the cost of her own life.

While he admired her sentiment, he didn’t think this was the time or the place for her to act on it.

“If you’re willing to go that far, drag her back to the checkpoint,” he said, eyeing Shiori with growing annoyance. “That would solve all our problems.”

“Given my position, I opt to respect Miss Reina’s wishes whenever possible. I would only do otherwise if circumstances required it.”

Akira sighed again and held a hand to his head, exasperated. *Can you get me out of this, Alpha?*

It’s outside my ability, she replied. *Just give in and try not to let it bother you.*

Why do I have to go scouting with that walking trouble factory? Akira pulled a face, ignoring his own track record for stirring things up.

Because trying to strong-arm your way out of this will only make things worse, Alpha reproached him, smiling.

Well, yeah, but—

Look on the bright side: they’ll at least make good shields or decoys, and they’ll leave on their own if they get hurt. You don’t want to risk actually *pulling a gun on them, do you?*

I guess not, Akira reluctantly admitted.

He gave up and resumed his scouting mission, ignoring the pair behind him as he cautiously advanced toward Checkpoint Fifteen. He kept his scanner trained on his surroundings, meticulously checking for monsters. Even when he detected no threats, he trod carefully, remembering the time he’d found himself hemmed in by scorpions. Alpha was supposed to point out whatever he missed, but he couldn’t relax when a pile of debris right beside him might be a scorpion in disguise. His extreme caution slowed his progress to a crawl.

Then a thought struck him.

Hey, Alpha, do I have my scanner configured right?

Nope.

No, huh? Akira looked conflicted, grateful for the help but a little put out by her blunt response. Alpha laughed and pointed out what he'd done wrong.

Different environments demanded different scanner settings. Not even gun-sight link configurations were universal. Where the local monsters could blend into their surroundings, sensors required adjustments to see through camouflage.

The search radius setting was equally vital. Shrinking it increased the risk of threats spotting Akira before he could detect them. But scanning a wider area decreased precision, meaning camouflaged monsters were more likely to get the jump on him. He had to consider all these factors and carefully adjust his device accordingly.

So, basically, it's way too much for me to handle right now, Akira said, throwing in the towel. *Alpha, would you tweak these settings for me?*

Sure, she replied. *There, that should do it. But I'll see to it that you learn how to do this yourself someday.*

Alpha's recalibration rapidly improved the scanner's performance and dramatically changed what Akira saw displayed on the clear visor he wore. He got clear readings on the pair walking behind him, and the once-hazy 3D map of his surroundings updated as well. That wasn't all—the device now showed him the difference between the data the reconnaissance team had recorded while mapping the area and the current terrain, down to the smallest sliver of debris. And echolocation gave him a clearer picture of what lay around corners and other obstacles.

The transformation stunned Akira. *It's night and day. Would you have let me wander around with those settings forever if I hadn't asked?*

Learning to tell when they need a change is part of your training too, Alpha replied.

Akira hung his head. *I'll work on it.*

Hang in there. As usual, Alpha was smiling.

Chapter 42: Conflict Resolution

Akira stalked through the underground, bent on investigating the scorpion attack on Checkpoint Fifteen. Reina and Shiori accompanied him, ignored but determined to join in despite his prickly attitude toward them.

After a while, though, Reina began to eye the boy walking ahead of her with suspicion. “Shiori, why is he going so slow?”

“Everyone has their own idea of how quickly one should move through ruins.” Shiori understood Reina’s impatience but kept her reply neutral. “He must believe in scouting thoroughly, no matter how long it takes.”

But Reina wasn’t placated. “He’s still going way too slow,” she griped thoughtlessly. “I mean, we have three people watching for threats.”

Reina knew scouting was vital. The subterranean halls were full of hiding places for monsters, whether down side paths, behind rubble, or in ruined shops. And Yarata scorpions could blend into their surroundings. She didn’t blame Akira for wanting to make absolutely certain. Even so, if what she’d heard about his record was true, he should have been able to make better time—especially after dividing scouting duties among a team of three.

Shiori hesitated to respond, knowing her answer would rankle Reina. Yet she couldn’t feign ignorance in the face of such a direct question—her loyalty wouldn’t allow it. So she gave her honest opinion: “Not three. One.”

“How? There are three of us.”

“He isn’t counting on us for anything, miss—not combat, not reconnaissance. See the way he rechecks areas we’ve already scanned? He’s also taking care to position himself so that if we encounter any scorpions, he can fend them off using only his own firepower. So for all intents and purposes, he’s acting alone.”

Shiori’s assessment was correct. Akira’s approach was partly a result of his training and partly a precaution in case she and Reina opted to use him as a decoy and run. Reina, however, took it as a sign he considered them dead weight. Her face contorted in rage. But she gritted her teeth, resisting

the urge to snap at him—she *had* tagged along uninvited, after all. If her shouts attracted monsters, she would prove herself every bit the incompetent Akira thought her.

"You mean he can't trust us to do anything?" she asked. Her voice was soft but unmistakably furious, and under her somewhat calm veneer she trembled with rage.

"He doesn't know what you're capable of, miss," Shiori replied, keeping her voice calm to soothe Reina. "And since hunter rank doesn't necessarily indicate combat ability, he isn't being entirely unreasonable. Try to look at it this way: he's simply trying to eliminate uncertainty wherever he can—and that includes not trusting his life to the skills of a stranger."

"Well, you have a point, but—"

"It's difficult to size someone up at a glance. Even Mr. Katsuya, for all his skill, is often dismissed solely because he is young. And unfortunately, I suspect we make an even worse impression."

A hunter's rank reflected their overall competence, not monster-fighting ability specifically. Some compensated for their ineptitude as scouts or relic hunters with their outstanding combat skills. Others did the opposite. And members of either group could end up with the same hunter rank as long as they got similar results.

Somewhat mollified by Shiori's explanation, Reina began to speculate. Akira might be a combat specialist—that would fit with what she'd heard of his record. Maybe he'd seen more than his fair share of higher-ranking hunters who were no good in a fight. If so, she could—grudgingly—accept his attitude. The thought calmed her, though it didn't completely dispel her annoyance.

"Perhaps we should turn back after all, miss," Shiori suggested earnestly. "I don't believe you'll benefit from continuing to accompany him like this."

"No," Reina said after a moment of silence. If she left now, her only contribution would be dogging Akira uninvited and getting in the way. She didn't want that. More than anything else, Reina wanted a chance to prove herself—to gain confidence and pride in her own abilities.

Shiori frowned, concerned by the risks they ran. Reina stubbornly refused to return, and Akira probably didn't consider them allies. If the group encountered a scorpion swarm too large for the three of them to fight,

would he turn on Shiori and Reina, forcing them to act as decoys while he escaped alone? Shiori couldn't discount that possibility—she would do the same if necessary.

If she couldn't change Reina's mind, Shiori concluded, she would have to change Akira's. At the very least, she needed to improve their relations with him enough to ensure he would work with them in an emergency.

So she started devising a plan.

◆

Akira stopped walking and groaned. He'd come a long way searching for traces of the scorpions that had attacked Checkpoint Fifteen, but so far he'd drawn a blank. Perhaps he just wasn't a good enough scout?

Alpha, he said. *I know tracking the scorpions is part of my training, but this is a job and I'm doing my best, so tell me if I miss anything.*

Don't worry. I will, Alpha cheerfully reassured him. *I wouldn't want you stumbling into a bunch of scorpions just because you're supposed to be practicing.*

Thanks. Akira cracked a grin. *So, there really aren't any traces to find? HQ's not gonna be happy if this keeps up. They'll wanna know why I wasted so much time on nothing.* He scowled.

Alpha deduced that he was more worried about the quality of his own work than what headquarters would say about it. She smiled kindly. *If that happens, let them complain. If HQ were serious about this investigation, they would have sent the recon team. But they called you off security detail, so don't worry if making a thorough sweep takes you a while. Just keep going at a safe, steady pace.* Alpha was also one of Akira's clients, of course. So, while she appreciated his dedication, she didn't want him to die before finishing her job. Her concern was deep but self-serving, designed to temper his excessive concern for his work.

Yeah, I guess you're right. Akira brightened. He was about to resume his search when Shiori called to him.

"Please wait. I wish to speak with you."

Akira tried to ignore her—but her next remark stopped him in his tracks.

"I'll hire you to guard Miss Reina. Let us negotiate a contract."

Akira spun to face her, floored. It took a few moments for his brain to

catch up to his ears. Even then, he found her motives inscrutable, and all he could say was “Huh?”

“Allow me to explain my specific requirements,” Shiori continued, satisfied that he was at least listening. She hoped to make her pitch while he was still confused—and her explanation only made things worse. “You would be responsible for guarding Miss Reina for the duration of the Yarata scorpion extermination, as long as she remains near enough to you for that to be feasible. I will pay you five million aurum upon successful completion of this task. I won’t penalize you if orders from headquarters or other factors beyond your control prevent you from accompanying her, but if you seek out such opportunities or actively endanger her, I will reduce your payment by—”

“W-Wait a second! What are you babbling about?!” Reina interrupted. She had been as stunned as Akira, but whereas he was confused, she responded with panic.

“I’m hiring a guard for you, miss,” Shiori replied. “Since you decline to withdraw, I must take other means to ensure your safety. If you agree to return to the checkpoint, I will withdraw my offer.”

“B-But Druncam would *never* agree to pay an outsider five million aurum!”

“Have no fear; I’ll use my personal funds. It’s a significant sum but a small price to pay for your safety.”

Reina reeled. She could sense Shiori genuinely intended to pay five million aurum out of pocket. And asking her companion to reconsider would do no good—Shiori would never compromise on her safety. Reina didn’t really want Shiori to sacrifice that much for one of her whims, but what were her options? Docilely submit and return to the checkpoint? No, she felt driven to achieve something, an impulse aggravated by her stubborn streak. Reina couldn’t make up her mind, and it showed on her face as she locked eyes with Shiori, who wore a look of steadfast loyalty.

The outcome would depend on their clash of wills.

Akira watched the drama unfold before him, half-stupefied in spite of himself.

You better speak up, Alpha cautioned him. *Otherwise, you won’t get a say in whether you accept her offer.*

Akira snapped back to reality. “Wait,” he hurriedly cut in. “Whether you

go or stay, I won't take that job."

"If you find the terms unsatisfactory—including compensation—I'm willing to negotiate." Shiori spoke slowly, dangling the possibility of better pay before him.

But Akira shook his head. "No, that's not it. The problem's my skill, not your terms. I've got my hands full keeping myself safe; I can't handle guarding someone else on top of that. So no matter how much you offer, I can't accept."

"But you rescued a bunch of hunters from a scorpion swarm on your own," Reina said, taken aback. "The operator at HQ said so. How are you still not good enough?"

"He didn't say I pulled it off without breaking a sweat, did he? I blew through all the ammo I had on me and only barely made it out alive. I wouldn't do that again for anything."

"Why did you agree to do it in the first place, then?" Reina demanded.

"The hunters I bailed out didn't tell HQ it was Yarata scorpions. They just reported a bunch of bug-like monsters were attacking them. I didn't find out the truth until I got there, and just played the rest by ear."

"If you had such a rough time of it, why'd you accept a job exterminating scorpion nests?"

"I didn't want to!" Akira snapped. "*You* try turning down an offer from the Kugamayama DLS!"

"O-Oh." Reina faltered in the face of Akira's vehemence. Then she smiled stiffly and pressed on, determined to satisfy her lingering doubts. "So, you're not actually all that strong?"

"Of course I'm not!"

The operator's description had Reina and Shiori imagining Akira as a top-notch hunter plunging into a scorpion swarm, mowing down the bugs, and whisking the stranded group to safety. Akira's flat denial reduced that picture to dust.

"Headquarters also informed us that you killed a gluttonous crocodile alone," Shiori added, just to make certain. "Do you know what they were referring to?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah," Akira answered casually, pointing to the CWH slung on his back. "This thing's proprietary ammo took it out in one shot. That cartridge sure packed a punch; I can see why it was so expensive." Nothing

about his tone suggested that he'd fought fiercely against the beast.

Shiori filled in the gaps on her own: Gluttonous crocodiles varied widely from one to another. Even an unskilled hunter could take down a weaker specimen if he took it by surprise with powerful ammunition.

She and Reina took another look at Akira. The spell they had been under since talking to HQ was now broken, and he seemed like just another young hunter. In fact, he looked so weak it was a wonder he was there at all. An awkward silence fell. Their old assumptions about the situation had been overturned, and the women weren't sure how to respond. Reina, in particular, looked embarrassed. Shiori noticed, considered briefly, and made Akira a new offer.

"In that case, allow me to modify the terms. Please support Miss Reina until we return to the checkpoint. I will pay you one hundred thousand aurum in advance. Would that be acceptable?"

"Shiori?" Reina gave her companion a puzzled look. She didn't see the point.

Shiori gave Reina the kind of look she might have used to reprove an unruly younger sister. "I'll rescind my offer if you agree to return with me, but you don't want to do that, do you?"

Reina groaned and winced slightly. Shiori had seen right through her. The younger woman had insisted on following Akira when she'd believed him an expert, and she would seem pathetic if she ran off the moment she learned he was really nothing special. If he told her to leave, she would listen, but she couldn't quite bring herself to take the initiative.

All this had been part of Shiori's calculations when she made her second offer to Akira. If he refused, Reina would have a pretext to leave. If he accepted, the advance payment would compensate him for the strange situation they'd dragged him into, and hence improve their working relationship with him. Either way, it would solve their problem.

Shiori shifted her gaze back to Akira and awaited his response. He was still debating what he ought to do when Alpha piped up.

Why not accept? she suggested. *Another refusal could start an argument you don't need. Besides, I don't think she seriously expects you to protect that girl; this job offer is basically an excuse to help everyone get along on this scouting trip. Take the offer and put all this fuss behind you. I won't insist, but that's my advice.*

All right. Why not? Shiori and Reina weren't counting on Akira's skill; they just wanted him to have their backs during the investigation. He could manage that much and was getting sick of arguing. So, without further deliberation, he said, "Sure, I'll take the job. I'm Akira."

"My name is Shiori. Here you are." The woman held out ten bills, each worth ten thousand aurum, and Akira accepted them, sealing the deal.

"So, what's the plan?" he asked Reina as he pocketed the money.

"What do you mean?" she responded.

"I mean, what are we gonna do next? I just signed on to back you up, so I'll more or less go along with whatever you decide. Now, what'll it be?"

"Well..." Reina wavered. She'd never had a clear plan of action; her only thought when she'd set out had been to be there when trouble arose and prove she could handle it. And because she'd taken her orders from Katsuya up to this point, she wasn't used to making big decisions. Put on the spot, she couldn't think of anything to say.

"We would be happy to continue following your initial plan," Shiori answered for her. "We can make course corrections later if we feel it necessary. I believe that should suffice."

"Y-Yes, that's just what we'll do!" Reina hastily agreed.

"As you wish," said Akira.

And so, he ended up leading the group as they searched the tunnels.

A short while after they started moving again, Reina found herself studying Akira from behind even as she scanned their surroundings for threats. They were traveling faster, now that they had divided scouting duties, but their pace was still slow by Reina's standards. And the number one reason for their lack of progress? Akira was no good as a scout. He was definitely holding them back—a predictable result of allowing an inexperienced young hunter to take point.

But Reina couldn't help doubting herself. Akira could never have earned his combat record if this were all he was capable of. Nor would he have accepted orders without complaint and set out on this expedition alone. And above all, Kugamayama City's Department of Long-Term Strategy would never have offered a job to such a poor excuse for a hunter.

Akira, she guessed, had probably been scouted personally—unlike Reina and the rest of Katsuya's team, who had gotten the job through

Druncam's connections. And since he had no partners to compensate for his inexperience, the DLS must have hired him for his individual combat ability. Yet he denied being particularly skilled, in a tone that had led Reina to believe him at the time.

But when she reconsidered with a cooler head, it just didn't add up. She could have accepted it if his abilities skewed heavily toward combat, but the young rookie in front of her hardly gave that impression. Things didn't add up that way either. So in the end, Akira's capabilities remained an enigma—one Reina couldn't help wondering about.

"Is something on your mind, miss?" Shiori asked, meaning to scold Reina for her loss of concentration.

"Oh, sorry. It's nothing." Reina concentrated on her work. But before long, her attention began to wander again.

In a way, Shiori knew Reina's mind better than Reina did. The girl only cared so much about Akira's skill because she could use it to gauge her own; the actual extent of his capabilities barely mattered. But Reina was only dimly aware of that herself, and her thoughts kept veering off track. Shiori decided that repeated warnings would have little effect and devised a different plan.

"Mr. Akira," she said, "what is your opinion of Miss Reina's ability?"

"Why ask me?" Akira responded, caught off guard. "I'm nowhere near good enough to size people up at a glance, so I can only tell you that I don't really know."

"My judgment is biased because we're too close; and we wouldn't get a straight answer from Druncam because of their internal politics. So I'd simply like to hear a disinterested opinion while I have the opportunity. Please, consider it part of supporting Miss Reina."

"I'm still not sure I can help you." Akira began to worry. If this was part of his job, then he needed to take it seriously, but he had no idea what to say. So he sought help.

Alpha.

Think for yourself, Alpha said, laughing. *Learning to judge people you've just met is part of becoming a good hunter. Consider this a training exercise and give it your best shot.*

Besides its surface meaning, her reply was also meant to steer him away from recklessly picking fights. She wanted him to develop the habit of

gauging potential opponents' strength and calmly avoiding trouble if they were better not provoked. When he had killed gang members in the slums, and when he had rescued Elena and Sara, Akira had first made up his mind to fight and then sought Alpha's help to take care of the rest. But she would have much preferred he avoid pointless conflict by reversing those steps: deciding whether he really wanted to fight only after assessing his enemies' strength.

She still didn't grasp what made him tick.

Denied Alpha's help, Akira turned a worried look to Shiori. "Hmm... I'm not clear on what you mean by 'ability,'" he said. "Can you give me any frame of reference? I mean, what makes a good monster hunter isn't the same as what makes a good scout, right? And there must be a lot of different ways to judge."

"That's a good question," Shiori replied. "Suppose you were to hire Miss Reina as your partner on a hunt. What's the most you would be willing to pay her? If you need to know her combat record or other additional information, please don't hesitate to ask. I'll answer what I can within reason."

How much would someone pay to hire a hunter? In a sense, it was the simplest and most relevant criterion possible. Reina was eager to learn exactly what her skill amounted to. She planned to answer any questions honestly—acting evasive or putting on airs risked distorting the results.

But Akira immediately said, "Oh. In that case, I *wouldn't* hire her."

That left Reina more stunned than angry. This was just about the worst evaluation she could imagine. He had basically said he wouldn't work with her for free, let alone pay for her help. And to say so in his matter-of-fact tone—without a hint of humor, malice, or scorn—left her dazed.

"Mr. Akira, I must question your judgment," Shiori said, failing to mask her displeasure. "Kindly either revise it or justify it to my satisfaction." She spoke softly but with a note of threat, making her feelings clear and snapping Reina back to her senses.

"That's easy: she'd be a pain in the ass to work with," Akira responded, unfazed. "But I'll take that back if she's strong enough to kill—oh, I don't know—fifty Yarata scorpions and everyone back at Checkpoint Fourteen no problem."

"I...I can't pretend I'm anywhere near that good," Reina cut in, shaken.

“But that doesn’t mean—”

Akira cut her off. “Remember when you picked a fight with that guy, 147? How far ahead were you thinking then? Did you keep antagonizing him because you knew you could win if it turned into a firefight? Or did you have a good reason to think he’d never pull a gun on you?”

Akira waited for Reina’s answer, but she couldn’t give one. Her resolution to be honest and humble was already wavering. She’d picked that fight because she didn’t like being looked down on and never stopped to consider the consequences, but she couldn’t bring herself to say so. Faced with the shock of Akira’s rejection, she took refuge in anger and responded with a question of her own.

“What...what else was I supposed to do?! Are you telling me I should have just let him talk down to me like that?!”

“No, I think you’re free to choose,” Akira said, his tone still casual. “There’s nothing wrong with deciding to kill somebody for trash-talking you—if you can predict the consequences and live with them. Contempt can get you killed, and sometimes shoving a gun in someone’s face and threatening them is the right call. As long as you thought it through and prepared yourself, I don’t have a problem with it. So, how did you expect that showdown to turn out?”

Again, he watched Reina carefully and waited for her response, but she didn’t have one. She couldn’t admit that she hadn’t so much as considered the consequences.

“Mr. Akira, I don’t think your assumptions are quite fair,” Shiori interjected, already regretting her initial question. “If the situation had deteriorated to that extent, I would have done my utmost to defuse it.”

“So she acted on impulse because she knew you’d handle things, no matter how bad they got? Fair enough. Sorry, I didn’t realize you wanted my opinion of you two as a team. I take back what I said, then.”

“And why would killing fifty Yarata scorpions and every other hunter at the checkpoint matter?” Shiori pressed.

“Just a rough estimate. I figured if she was strong enough to pull that off, she’d have nothing to worry about. Even if that argument turned nasty and then a swarm attacked, she could have dealt with someone trying to put a bullet in her back no problem.”

“Isn’t that scenario rather extreme?” Shiori ventured.

“Absolutely,” Akira admitted with alacrity. Though Shiori’s ire grew, he still returned her gaze without flinching. “I just described a worst-case scenario. It’s so unlikely that, normally, you shouldn’t have to plan for it. But it’s all relative. The point is, how much trouble can she handle, and how well? Going by the mood at Checkpoint Fourteen and the way she acted with me and 147, she seems like the kind of person who causes more trouble than she needs to, and I wouldn’t pay to keep someone like that around. That’s all there is to it. But I’m not gonna pretend I know best, so if you don’t like my answer, just brush it off as a dumb kid’s dumb opinion.”

Akira meant what he said about the probability of such a scenario, but he also believed that “normal” probabilities didn’t apply to him. Where he was concerned, unlikely situations were the norm. So he’d based his answer on one so extreme most people wouldn’t bother considering it.

Shiori and Reina both heard him out in silence, but their reactions had nothing else in common. Reina hung her head dejectedly, while Shiori’s expression filled with silent fury.

“I’ve heard your explanation, although I won’t comment on whether it was to my satisfaction. Now, allow me to ask you one final question.” Shiori paused and gave Akira a look that left no doubt what she thought of him. “Did you anticipate that your answer would anger me?”

In other words, he must have realized that she served Reina, she seemed to say. And after all his talk about thinking things through, he should have foreseen this outcome. Turnabout was fair play—Shiori’s threat was meant to rattle him. But Akira’s next words escalated things.

“You ordered me to answer as a form of support,” he answered resolutely. “I’d accepted a job from you, so I wanted to make my best effort. And I figured that meant being honest, even if it wasn’t what you wanted to hear.”

Shiori had asked if he was prepared to fight her to the death.

He’d answered that he was.

Both were already poised for combat. If either so much as twitched, their last, slim chance to back down would be gone. Each stood stock-still, eyes peeled for an opening and expecting a counterattack. Neither considered demanding the other disarm at gunpoint. Both knew how this would go: they would fire immediately, aiming to at least incapacitate their opponent, and to kill them outright if they had time to line up a clean shot—

which they probably wouldn't.

Had Akira responded to Shiori's threat, or had Shiori answered Akira's provocation? It didn't matter unless one of them backed down.

Akira didn't realize it, but his skills had been improving with extraordinary speed—the fruits of Alpha's highly efficient training. Otherwise he wouldn't have survived two massive monster attacks in one day, even with a bit of luck on his side. But he never rated himself highly because he knew how insignificant his own strength was compared to Alpha's support. That knowledge had warped his self-perception.

Self-impressions mattered in situations like this: those with firm confidence in their own ability presented the appearance of strength, and vice versa. Akira's low opinion of himself acted as camouflage, making him seem less capable than he really was. The sharp divide between his apparent skill and real combat strength made him into a brutal trap for the unwary—a kid like a land mine disguised as a pebble, waiting to kill anyone who trampled or kicked him. And now that land mine lay right in Shiori's path.

The tension in the air continued to mount. It was only a matter of time until one of them took things to the next level. If Shiori stepped forward, spurred on by Akira's animosity, the land mine would explode. But Reina intervened.

"Shiori, stop," she pleaded weakly, eyes still downcast.

"M-Miss?" The fury began to fade from Shiori's eyes.

"That's enough. Please. No more."

Shiori relaxed, and Akira followed suit. Their battle had been averted. For the moment.

Akira breathed easier. Beside him, Alpha watched and let out an ostentatious sigh of her own. Then she gave him a confident grin. *Despite your speech and your aggrieved innocent act, I see you're quite the "walking trouble factory" yourself.*

I-It's not like I went looking for a fight. Akira's expression stiffened. He knew it was a poor excuse.

I know I told you to take the job and to think for yourself, Alpha continued, still cheerful as she scrutinized him. *But I didn't count on you working so hard to overturn my carefully calculated predictions. Don't worry, I understand where you're coming from. You don't need to show off like that, you know?*

S-Sorry. Akira hoped the apology would smooth things over.

Alpha smiled placidly. The fight—which she could have prevented by telling him to just say something nice, even if he didn't mean it—had

seemingly blown over without a body count.

Chapter 43: The Swarm

An uncomfortable mood hung over the three hunters. Shiori had only asked Akira a simple question: how did he rate Reina's ability? But she'd taken umbrage at his dismal response, and they had nearly come to blows. Though neither had anything to gain by killing the other, Shiori felt excessively protective of Reina, while Akira remained stubborn as always. So their personalities had driven them to the brink of conflict—until Reina had accepted Akira's judgment, defusing the situation.

But although both sides had backed down, they couldn't simply forget their dispute. So Akira fully expected Reina and Shiori would return to Checkpoint Fourteen. To his surprise, however, they stayed with him.

Reina felt crestfallen, but she carried out her share of the scouting as well as ever—better, in fact, now that she had no idle thoughts to distract her. It broke Shiori's heart to see her like this, however. Up ahead, Akira could sense the mood behind him, and it made him uncomfortable. He had tried to act in good faith, but the disastrous results spoke for themselves. And since his job was to support Reina, he wondered if perhaps he could've been more conscientious.

I know it's too late now, he said, *but do you think I should've just said something nice and considered keeping them happy to be part of my job?*

Absolutely, if staying out of trouble is your top priority, Alpha responded, with a sardonic edge to her smile. *You should at least have worked out a nicer way of telling them. That was a failure on your part.*

Well, you've got me there, but—

But your desire to do your job right counts for more than that. Speaking as one of your other clients, I was glad to see you show such dedication.

O-Oh.

That girl might think twice about picking fights from now on after what you said. So maybe you did her a favor. Don't beat yourself up over it too much.

In the slums, brute force was king, and its law was simple: toady up,

hand over everything you've got, and beg for your life—or die. Akira had been one of the toadies, although never the worst of them. And he'd set out to become a hunter because he wanted the strength to break free of that life.

And now he was a hunter. He had a little power of his own—enough to rebel against his former plight, even if he couldn't fully escape it yet. So, unconsciously, he refused to slip back into his old ways. Part of him feared that a return to currying favor would land him right back where he'd started.

He would rather die.

But Akira didn't understand what drove him, and he found his own behavior puzzling. Meanwhile, Alpha was always ready to take advantage of his doubts, behind her kind, reassuring smile.

Akira kept searching until he found a Yarata scorpion lying dead in one of the underground corridors. Fluids dripping from the bullet holes that riddled its body, and the stumps of several shredded legs had left a gory line on the floor in its wake.

Might be one of the scorpions that attacked Checkpoint Fifteen, since its trail points that way, Akira mused, comparing the corpse with his map. *If it was trying to get back to the nest before it kicked the bucket here, I'm guessing it wasn't the only bug headed that way. And if they left tracks, we can find out where they're going. Alpha, think you can pick up any other scorpions around here?*

I don't see any, living or dead, within my scanning radius, Alpha replied.

Oh. Well, we can't call off the investigation just 'cause we found one body, so I guess we'll just have to keep looking.

I'll pick up traces that most would miss. But if I show you something too *faint, other people may wonder how you found it. In that case, you'll have to devise some rationale on the fly. Do you still want me to take a look?*

Good point. Akira hesitated briefly before answering. *Go ahead. After everything that's happened, I wanna find something and get this over with ASAP. If anyone asks, I'll just chalk it up to intuition or coincidence.*

I told you to "devise some rationale," not "do something irrational."

Akira chuckled. *Why start worrying about that now? I'm only here because the stuff I did with your help impressed people, and what else can I say if someone asks how I pulled it off? It all comes down to the same thing.*

Very well. Alpha smiled, amused by his bluster. *Found it.*

That was fast! Akira goggled at her in surprise.

Piece of cake. Alpha pointed smugly to a passage leading away from Checkpoint Fifteen, highlighting normally imperceptible traces in Akira's augmented vision. She even marked a new route for him based on her findings.

Reina and Shiori were surprised—and a little suspicious—to see Akira suddenly veer off in a new direction. But Reina felt dejected, and Shiori hesitated to address someone she'd just come close to fighting, so both followed without questioning his decision.

At first glance, these new passages seemed no different from the ones they had left. But Alpha's analysis turned up a variety of traces: faint scratches on the hard floor, gaps where something had forced its way through the scattered contents of a ruined storefront, and barely detectable splashes of arachnid hemolymph. They all added up to one conclusion: a lot of Yarata scorpions had passed this way.

Akira's awareness of the signs affected his movements unconsciously—and Shiori noticed. She watched him curiously, realizing he was moving toward a definite goal, or at least following a clear trail. But just when she was about to demand an explanation from the young hunter in front of her, he halted and looked to one side.

Akira's gaze was fixed on a hole in the wall. The opening was wide—at least four meters across—and in the unlit passage, there was no telling where it led. Worst of all, it wasn't on their map.

The boy shone a light into the gap and saw about thirty meters of dirt-walled tunnel, beyond which he glimpsed a man-made floor. It clearly led to another part of the underground district, but the map showed nothing on its far end.

He had to notify headquarters. "This is Twenty-Seven. Come in, HQ."

"This is HQ. What's up?"

"I found a big hole that's not on the map, and I think it connects to another part of the underground. This might be where the scorpions that attacked Checkpoint Fifteen came from."

"Wait a sec." The operator went silent for a moment. Then, "Point the camera on your work terminal at the hole."

Akira did, and the terminal transmitted a video feed to headquarters,

along with a range of other data.

"I see it too," the operator confirmed. "The hole leads to an area we don't know about yet—probably full of scorpion nests."

"Are there really that many of them?"

"Affirmative. There are Yarata scorpion breeding grounds all over this underground complex. We've already wiped out seventeen nests, but I bet there's still a lot more where they came from. The whole place is practically one big colony."

Akira grimaced. He remembered the swarm that had attacked him in the building and didn't like the image of a whole tunnel system full of them. "You don't say. Well, anyway, there's nothing left to investigate. I'll return to Checkpoint Fourteen."

He was ready to head back, relieved that his search had ended safely, despite the bit of trouble on the way. And his job from Shiori would end as soon as they were all back at the checkpoint. But headquarters had other ideas.

"Negative," the operator responded. "We need to establish a new checkpoint first. Stay put and stop any more monsters from coming through until additional personnel arrive."

"Hold up. You want us to hold this place *alone*? You've gotta be kidding."

"Negative, Twenty-Seven. You left to investigate alone, so you must be confident in your ability. And now you've got two assistants—including the highest ranked hunter assigned to Checkpoint Fourteen. I'd say you've got all the firepower you need, and temporarily defending positions is part of the security team's job. So get to work."

"Roger that," Akira responded reluctantly. He couldn't bring himself to report that he'd just gotten into a nearly lethal argument with his "assistants."

A series of portable lights, set at intervals along the corridor, did much to brighten the area around the hole. Visibility still wasn't ideal, but even this dim illumination was almost blinding compared to the subterranean darkness they had found here. Yet the depths of the opening in the wall remained shrouded in inky blackness that seemed to reject the light.

Down here, the brightness of a passage was a clear indicator of how

dangerous it was to traverse. Monster encounters were far more likely in unexplored zones than in the wake of even a cursory sweep. Akira stood guard at the border between light and darkness, sitting in the dim corridor and staring into the hole. But where he should have seen only blackness, his Alpha-enhanced vision perceived a stretch of tunnel, albeit in monochrome.

This enhanced sight sure comes in handy, he remarked. *You did the same thing under that house in Higaraka, right?*

That's right, Alpha replied. *I think you'll agree it's a big improvement on stumbling around in the dark.*

Definitely. Will it help me spot any scorpions coming through the hole?

Don't worry about that. If any do, I'll detect them and warn you before you can see them.

Thanks.

In this way, Akira passed the time chatting and reviewing his lessons with Alpha while he waited for the hunters who would secure this point for real.

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Reina and Shiori stood behind Akira, across the passage, and kept watch to either side. A scorpion attack didn't have to come from the hole in the wall. So while Akira guarded the opening, they stayed alert to danger from anywhere else.

As Shiori carried out her duties, she also scrutinized Akira, calmly reassessing the boy she'd almost gotten into a firefight with. Since accurately sizing up other people made it easier to keep Reina out of harm's way, her loyalty had driven her to hone the talent. And once again, Akira struck her as just another young hunter. At the very least, he didn't seem as skilled as his combat record suggested.

But Shiori found herself questioning her judgment and probed deeper. At that moment when they'd almost come to blows, Akira's resolve had been genuine—she couldn't deny that. Had he been willing to fight her to prove a point, knowing that he would die? She didn't think so. Yet he hadn't seemed so green that he couldn't recognize her skill either. So had he decided that he *could* beat her? Was she looking at a skillful performance, behind which lurked the capable hunter his record implied? She took another look at him.

Surely not, she decided, dismissing her suspicions.

Shiori realized her thoughts were going in circles. So she gave up speculating. A lot about Akira didn't add up, however strong he was, but this much was certain: threats wouldn't make him back down. If he fought alongside Reina, the worst might happen. Refraining from any careless moves seemed her safest course.

I didn't mean to take him lightly, but I did, she thought. *I assumed he would be easy to intimidate. That was a blunder. Who knows what might have happened if Miss Reina hadn't stepped in? I should be ashamed of myself.* Silently, Shiori reaffirmed her oath of loyalty—and her wariness of the enigmatic boy.

Reina, meanwhile, had been feeling miserable, but over time her mood had begun to recover under Shiori's caring attention. The terrain made a rear ambush unlikely, and she had a trustworthy companion at her side. The quiet and dim lighting even made for a soothing atmosphere. As she regained her calm, Reina began to reflect on the expedition thus far.

He asked if I thought through how fights I picked would turn out—if I was ready for arguments to end in killing. And I couldn't answer.

She'd just seen what could happen: Shiori and Akira had been poised for battle, primed to kill each other at the slightest provocation. Mimata had merely sneered when she'd snapped at him, but what if he hadn't? Her provocations could easily have invited a similar result—or worse.

So, he wouldn't hire someone who starts pointless fights, not even for free. I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

Reina looked back on her behavior with a cooler head. She had picked plenty of fights before now, and some of them, she was now sure, could have turned dangerous. She might have been running through a minefield without realizing it. And though she'd avoided violence so far, that wouldn't hold true forever. It was easy to misjudge someone's limits when you dug in your heels and tried to impose your own views—even if no one involved wanted to get into a fight.

Shiori had probably been working tirelessly to keep Reina's actions from blowing up in her face. Today, however, Shiori had almost stepped on a land mine herself. Reina had managed to prevent an explosion at the last second, but what if Akira had gone off? Imagining the outcome, Reina berated herself.

Her mood wasn't lost on Shiori. "You shouldn't dwell on it, miss," the woman said tenderly. "It's important to move on. Besides which, I was at fault for needlessly provoking Mr. Akira. We both have lessons to learn from this experience."

It occurred to Reina that Shiori's anger had been on her behalf. Her companion's concern gladdened her, but she also felt guilty about it. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've really shown my gratitude in a while," she murmured, chiding herself. Then she straightened up and bowed. "Shiori, I'm sorry for all the trouble I've put you through. Thank you for bailing me out. I'm sure I'll cause a lot more problems in the future, but may I keep counting on you?"

"O-Of course! I'm always at your service!" Shiori nearly fainted, she was so deeply moved, but she held on through sheer force of will. She didn't permit herself tears either—this was a battlefield, and blurred vision would impact her performance in combat.

"Thank you, Shiori. I couldn't ask for a better partner." Feeling more her usual self, Reina forced a slight smile to reassure her companion.

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Though Akira never stopped scanning for threats, he also kept an eye on the women behind him. He remembered how bad their disagreement had gotten, and he wasn't eager for a bullet in his back.

What are they up to? he asked nervously.

Deepening their friendship, I believe, Alpha cheerfully replied.

That's not what I mean. I wanna know if— Oh, never mind.

If Reina and Shiori meant him no harm, Akira decided, then he didn't much care what they did. He lost interest in what was going on behind his back and dismissed the pair from his mind.

Alpha wore her usual smile as she watched him—observing, conjecturing, and learning more about what drove him. The ideal beauty of her computer-generated face and its meticulously calculated smile would never betray the true intentions of the mind that lurked behind them.

To all appearances, the tunnel remained quiet, but Akira's expression turned grave as he stared into its depths. He stood up and kicked his open

backpack, scattering the magazines inside across the floor. Then he trained his CWH anti-materiel rifle on the dark opening.

Alerted by his movements, Reina and Shiori cautiously moved up beside him. They studied the hole, expecting to see an impending attack, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Reina checked her scanner and saw nothing alarming there either.

"Did your scanner pick something up?" she asked, turning to Akira in confusion.

"I'll handle this side. You two keep an eye on the hallway." Akira was already prepared to intercept an assault. All he had to do now was pull the trigger.

Alpha, how many are there?

I count 124 within my scanning radius, she replied. *And more keep coming.*

Why does this always happen to me? Akira groaned.

Alpha laughed. *Well, with your luck, what else do you expect? You should be used to it by now, so keep calm and get down to business.*

Fair enough. Akira grinned ruefully. *Let's hope your support can still compensate for my rotten luck. You promised to make up for all the good fortune I've used, remember?*

Leave it to me. Alpha took her place beside Akira, a confident smile on her face.

Shiori saw that Akira wasn't just being cautious—he was standing by for a real battle. So she resolved to take no chances. She moved into position beside him, raised her rifle, and fired several small flares into the opening. They struck at regular intervals along the tunnel, releasing a blaze of light that cleared the darkness from the dirt ahead and the man-made floor beyond. But she saw nothing hostile. She rechecked her scanner, the range of which was improved by the flares, but found no danger there either.

"Could you have imagined it?" she ventured.

Akira ignored her. Both Reina and Shiori regarded him with mounting suspicion.

Then darkness re-covered the far end of the tunnel, diminishing the visible area. The farthest flare had gone out—but not on its own, as these projectiles were designed to last at least fifteen minutes. Then the next farthest flare went out, and the next. Darkness was reclaiming the tunnel.

That finally convinced Reina and Shiori they were in for a fight. Noises started coming from the hole, growing steadily louder. They no longer needed their scanners to see what was happening: a swarm was barreling toward them, blocking the light and trampling the flares as it came.

Here they come, Alpha announced, smiling as usual. *Five, four, three, two, one.*

The last flare winked out.

Zero.

Akira pulled the trigger. The muzzle of his CWH flashed, momentarily peeling back the darkness. Yarata scorpions covered almost the entire length of the tunnel.

The CWH wasn't loaded with standard armor-piercing rounds—Akira hadn't packed any. In their place were magazines full of proprietary cartridges. His first devastating shot struck the lead scorpion, instantly splattering it in all directions before tearing into more behind it. That single bullet reduced at least a dozen bugs in a row to chunks of flesh.

Under normal circumstances, these cartridges were too powerful—and too pricey—to waste on scorpions. Even so, Akira didn't hesitate. His client was paying for his ammo, but even if he'd been footing the bill, this was no time to be stingy.

These things pack a hell of a punch! he shouted. *They're worth every aurum!*

And lucky for us, their effective range is nothing to sneeze at either, Alpha chimed in. *Keep firing and take out as many as you can.*

You got it!

Akira slid backward slightly with each squeeze of the trigger. Though precision engineering and advanced technology kept the proprietary ammo's recoil to a minimum, the powerful blasts would still have flung him into the opposite wall if not for his suit. But with his enhanced strength and Alpha's support, he maintained his stance and kept firing forward.

The hail of proprietary bullets ripped through scorpions like scrap paper. Akira could hardly believe how much damage they were doing. Yet he still looked grim—he didn't have the upper hand, and he knew it. Onward marched the scorpions, undaunted, through a shower of their comrades' gore, trampling the dead and crippled underfoot. The swarm never gave any sign of retreating.

Do these things even know how *to flinch?!* Akira demanded.

Probably not, Alpha replied.

I thought Checkpoint Fifteen scared off the swarm that hit them!

I don't think those scorpions ran away scared; they only withdrew to tell the rest where their enemies were and what they could do. They might have been a scouting party.

And this is the main force? Akira asked trepidatiously.

Possibly.

Then this is a whole new level of bad luck!

Stop whining and shoot. There's no end to them in sight.

Shit! Akira kept firing in desperation. His one-sided slaughter continued, thanks to his powerful ammunition and other advantages, but the scorpions never stopped flooding into the tunnel.

When he stopped to replace his empty magazine, the swarm gained a lot of ground. He scrambled to resume firing as soon as he was able, forcing the enemy line back until he emptied his magazine again. Over and over, the cycle repeated as he held his ground alone.

Reina and Shiori stood guard over the corridor as he'd instructed them, alert in case the enemy tried to ambush them from another direction. Naturally, they would have leaped to Akira's aid if he'd called for backup, but he never did. Despite telltale signs of desperation, he was holding the line without them. So they watched, awestruck by the strenuous efforts that proved Akira's combat record—and his skill—were genuine.

Chapter 44: Balancing the Books

Akira's bullets mowed down scorpions by the dozen. New bugs flooded into the tunnel and disintegrated, painting a fresh layer over the gore-strewn scenery. From the power of each shot, Reina guessed that he was firing CWH proprietary cartridges. Then she realized that his spare magazines, scattered on the floor, were all full of the same ammunition.

"What did you bring all that proprietary ammo down here for?!" she shouted in spite of herself. "You have to know that's overkill for Yarata scorpions! What were you planning to hunt, tanks?!"

"I just brought the best stuff I could!" Akira hollered back over the echoing roar of his rifle. "Gotta make up for my inexperience somehow! No way in hell would I fight a tank!"

"How did you even *get* this many?! And how did you earn enough to pay for them?! They can't have come cheap!"

"My client's covering ammo costs! I told them I'd use proprietary ammo by the truckload, and if they didn't like it, they could hire someone else! I figured they'd turn me down!"

"And they okayed that?!"

"I wouldn't be here otherwise! Come to think of it, those assholes must've known I could end up dealing with a mess like this!" There was no use crying over spilled milk, but Akira vowed to learn from this experience.

Reina looked at Shiori.

"It's possible, but in my opinion highly unlikely," Shiori said, answering the girl's unspoken question. "And I wouldn't consider this situation terribly dangerous if we were with the rest of the checkpoint security detail when it broke out."

Reina avoided eye contact. If not for her selfish whim, she and Shiori would be back at Checkpoint Fourteen with Katsuya and the others instead of mixed up in this fight. She knew that much and felt guilty about it.

Without warning, Shiori sprang nimbly into the middle of the passage and opened fire. Reina spun to look and saw scorpions die amid a hail of

bullets. Yet not a single bug had slipped past Akira.

"Where did they come from?!" she yelled in shock. "Are there more holes?!"

"Miss, we have company!"

These fresh scorpions were few in number, but they were closing in on the hunters from either end of the corridor. Reina and Shiori each took a side and launched their counterattack.

"There aren't enough of them for another hole!" Akira shouted, looking grim. "I bet these scorpions went to check out someplace other than Checkpoint Fifteen, and now they're on their way back! You two deal with them; I've got my hands full!"

"We will!" Reina answered clearly, telling herself this was no time for moping.

"I'm counting on you!" Akira yelled back, his voice edged with panic. "I mean it! I really, really mean it!" He couldn't handle an attack from the rear while fending off the hostile swarm ahead. Right now, he needed Reina and Shiori's help.

For a moment, Reina looked taken aback. Then she beamed confidently. "Leave it to us!"

Now Reina was more than ready to acknowledge Akira's skill. He'd been the first to notice the swarm. And since then, he'd held off the scorpion onslaught single-handed. She also knew CWH proprietary cartridges were as unwieldy as they were powerful. Unless Akira kept the recoil in check, each blast would fling his rifle off target and hurl him off his feet. But he held his stance and his aim for shot after shot, absorbing kicks strong enough to slide him backward. Impressed, Reina felt sharply aware of her own shortcomings, especially after his scathing assessment of her.

And now Akira needed her! He called desperately for her help! Reina's morale soared once more. Gone was her anxiety about her lack of skill, along with impatience, irritation, and everything else that had been holding her back. Freed of those burdens, she met the new wave of scorpions with swift, precise gunfire. Though her bullets lacked the force of Akira's, they still penetrated the bugs' tough exoskeletons with ease—she had armed herself for this job too.

Reina mowed down more and more of the ever-growing crowd of

scorpions. As she tore through the horde of foes, she smiled, rejoicing in the elation that came from performing flawlessly. She worked with a razor-sharp focus, allowing her natural talent to shine through for the first time, and left the corridor littered with hard-shelled corpses.

Shiori kept an eye on Reina while she fought, and the girl's agile, precise, and almost elegant movements left her stunned.

Have I misjudged Miss Reina? she wondered. *I never dreamed she was capable of this. Still, why now?* But while this sudden improvement mystified her, Shiori was delighted to see Reina grow, and she preferred not to look a gift horse in the mouth. The battle demanded her attention just now.

Thus, behind Akira's back, Reina and Shiori demonstrated that they'd earned their places here.

Akira emptied magazine after magazine, struggling desperately to hold the swarm at bay with a steady stream of his costly ammunition. If his client hadn't been footing the bill, he would have bankrupted himself a long time ago. Once again, Akira owed his survival to a strength not his own: firepower paid for by the city, plus Alpha's deadly aim. And he was still only barely scraping by.

Alpha! he shouted. *How can there be this many of them?!*

Don't panic—keep fighting, she replied. *You're holding back a swarm, and whining won't make it go away.*

I know that! But I'll burn through all my spare ammo if this keeps up!

When that happens, run like hell. We should be able to make it out if we sacrifice your legs. In other words, if Alpha took full control of Akira's powered suit, they could outrun the scorpions. But the toll on Akira's body would be considerable, as he well knew. He wasn't eager to escape that way if he could help it.

S-Save that for a last resort! he shouted.

Naturally, said Alpha. *Let's hope the enemy runs out of reinforcements or the backup HQ sent arrives before your ammo runs out.*

Oh, yeah! Our backup! They are *coming, right?! Maybe they're already almost here!*

I don't see any likely candidates in my scanning radius.

Damn it!

Akira was in no rush to find out what having his legs torn off by his own suit felt like. So he kept fighting, even as his mental stamina dwindled. He ejected an empty magazine from his CWH, quickly snatched a fresh one off the floor, and slotted it into place. Then he fired until he emptied that one too. Lather, rinse, repeat.

He was just starting to worry about his dwindling supply of cartridges when something happened.

First, the number of scorpions scuttling out of the side passages dropped off. Reina and Shiori wiped out those remaining in the corridor, and no new bugs appeared to take their place.

So too in the hole Akira guarded. Until now, the tunnel had been packed tight with scorpions—highlighted red in his vision. But now the press of red began to vanish, starting from the far end.

Akira, the scorpion reinforcements have stopped, Alpha reported.

Yes! Almost got 'em!

With newfound motivation, Akira drew on the last of his strength, pointed his rifle, and blasted away. His bullets pierced, shredded, and pulverized the bugs. The last spots of red faded from his vision, vanishing completely as the last scorpion flew apart under his assault. He stopped shooting; the echoes of gunfire died away, and silence returned to their intersection.

It's over! Alpha jubilantly announced. *Good work!*

"I-It's over," Akira repeated, slumping to the floor. He exhaled deeply, like he was trying to breathe out his accumulated fatigue.

The battle ended before your backup arrived, Alpha remarked. *I wonder if something happened to them.*

In the heat of battle, Akira had forgotten all about the promised help. Now he scrambled to pull out his terminal and call headquarters. "This is Twenty-Seven! HQ! Please come in!"

"This is HQ," a voice responded. "Keep your shirt on. What's the emergency?"

"What happened to our reinforcements?! There's no sign of them!"

"I already told them to head your way. They haven't arrived yet?"

"We haven't seen anyone! And we just fought off a boatload of Yarata scorpions with just the three of us! Could you tell them to hurry up?!"

"Roger that. But first, I'll check the battle logs from your terminal. Wait

a sec."

A new indicator appeared on the screen of Akira's work terminal as it transmitted the data. But even after the indicator vanished, a response from headquarters was not forthcoming. Akira was just about to speak up again when the operator exclaimed, "What the hell?! G-Gimme another minute!"

Moments later, Reina and Shiori received calls from HQ on their terminals.

"This is Seventeen," Reina answered. "What happened to our backup?"

"This is HQ," a voice responded. "Explain your situation."

"Until a few minutes ago, we were fighting a Yarata scorpion swarm. We only just finished repelling it."

"This is Eighteen," Shiori interjected. "Allow me to supplement Seventeen's report. We came under attack from a large Yarata scorpion swarm. They emerged from this hole in the wall, so I believe the area beyond contains a major nest—possibly more than one. Please dispatch recon and extermination teams immediately."

The line went silent for a moment. Then the operator exclaimed, "So Twenty-Seven's terminal *isn't* sending bad data?! Lemme check yours too. I've already called additional personnel, so sit tight until they get there."

"Please wait. What makes you suspect a malfunction?" Shiori asked.

"Twenty-Seven's terminal recorded way too many scorpion kills. We need to compare the log against the other terminals for confirmation."

"I don't believe you'll find anything amiss, sir. We all saw the scorpions flooding into the tunnel with our own eyes."

"For real? If you can be sure it's safe, go to the other end of that hole and send video. And if you've got lights with you, try to set those up while you're at it."

"The prospect isn't appealing, but very well."

"Thanks. HQ out."

Akira was busy picking up his spare magazines off the floor. CWH proprietary cartridges didn't come cheap. A magazine was even more expensive, and a pile of full magazines cost a small fortune. And now his heap was empty, its contents fired. Akira hadn't paid for the ammo, but he still felt gloomy when he imagined the money he'd just burned through. He looked vaguely uneasy as he returned any magazines that still had ammo in

them to his backpack.

They're not gonna turn around and tell me to cover my own ammo costs later, are they? he asked anxiously. *I'm in the clear, right?*

You'll be fine, Alpha cheerfully reassured him. *Probably.*

Wh-What do you mean, "probably"?!

I don't work at the Kugamayama City DLS, so I can't make any promises. But you'll be fine. Probably. Surely. Maybe. I think. Unless...

Oh, come on! Just tell me it'll be all right. Akira pulled a face. He knew Alpha was only messing with him, but the remote possibility still filled him with dread.

◆

Shiori began exploring the far side of the tunnel, as headquarters had instructed. Near the entrance, she installed some portable lights she'd brought, their illumination revealing more of the dark passage. Reina, who followed behind, summed up her reaction in a single word: "Ugh."

Before them lay a swamp, all that remained from the carnage Akira had inflicted on the swarm. His CWH had been overkill, literally blowing the bugs apart; and as the stream of fresh scorpions from the rear had trampled what was left, they'd mashed it into this growing pool of hemolymph. No one could work out his kill count from this mess. At best, it might be possible to estimate based on the time he'd spent fighting, the number of shots he'd fired, and the depth and breadth of the swamp. Shiori and Reina had been too preoccupied with their own battles to keep track of Akira's situation, but they'd never imagined it had been this bad.

"Please wait in the passage, miss," Shiori said, starting to wish she'd refused HQ's order. "This place isn't fit for you to set foot in."

"I'll be f-fine," Reina responded, her face strained. "This is nothing."

"You shouldn't force yourself, miss. Headquarters ordered *me* to go, so please, wait here."

"Don't worry; I'll help. I took this job, and I might see plenty more spots like this before it's over. So I'd better get used to it while I can." With a forced smile, Reina took a step into gore-soaked muck littered with scorpion limbs, chunks of flesh, and shards of exoskeleton. She couldn't suppress a grimace as she felt her foot squelch deep into the swamp, but she

kept moving, determined.

Reluctantly, Reina and Shiori kept making their way along the tunnel, installing lights as they went. Arachnid gore spattered the walls, and they felt more underfoot with every step. But they pushed through their revulsion and kept working.

◆

Once Akira finished cleaning up his magazines, he went to check on the corridor he'd left Reina and Shiori to defend. He found it heaped with scorpion corpses, but they all lay a certain distance from his position. Here was proof the women had protected Akira well, keeping the foe at bay so that he'd never been threatened from the sides. And unlike him, they'd fought without excessive firepower. The scorpion bodies were still whole enough to identify, and the bullet holes showed Reina and Shiori had been efficient, striking vulnerabilities with pinpoint accuracy.

The sight was a testament to the pair's skill, and although Akira was still too green to fully interpret what he saw, it still shocked and impressed him.

There aren't many bullet holes in the walls and floor, considering, Alpha supplied. *That proves they were picking their targets, not just strafing blindly. And they still killed all these scorpions. Those two know their stuff.*

Meaning I *couldn't pull this off?* Akira asked.

You could replicate it easily—with my support. All you'd need to do is dart around with a pair of AAHs loaded full of overpressure ammo, taking down monsters on all sides.

I'll take that as a "no," then. That'd just be you moving me around on your own. And it'd do a number on my arms, right?

Pretty much. I'm glad you're so quick on the uptake: it's good to know your limits. But remember: losing your arms is a lot better than losing your life. Don't worry too much, though—that probably wouldn't tear your arms off. *And even if it came close, there are always recovery capsules.*

Akira sighed. *I guess I'm not ready for this job yet. I should've been more careful.*

All he had wanted to know was whether he could have stood in for either Reina *or* Shiori. But Alpha had told him what it would take for one person to handle *both* their jobs alone.

She'd known exactly what she was doing, of course. His grasp of what counted as excellent performance was now far removed from reality.

◆

Not until Reina and Shiori had returned from their expedition into the hole did the long-awaited reinforcements finally arrive: more hunters from Checkpoint Fourteen and another group from Fifteen. Shiori and Akira both spotted Katsuya's team among the newcomers.

"This isn't quite what we said, but can I consider my job for you done now?" he asked her. He had agreed to support Reina until she returned to the checkpoint. Technically, he hadn't done that yet, but this amounted to more or less the same thing.

"I don't object. Thank you for your service," Shiori replied, bobbing her head in Akira's direction. He returned the gesture and moved away, as if to say that their business was concluded.

Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi—unaware of what had transpired between the two—eyed the departing Akira with suspicion. Reina looked faintly disappointed; Shiori noticed her reaction but ignored it, since pursuing it risked stirring up trouble. Instead, the senior hunter let out a relieved sigh.

We had a close call, but everything should be all right now. Though I'd better ask Mr. Katsuya to warn Miss Reina against rashly separating from the group. That ought to have some effect. Suddenly, a thought struck Shiori, and she shook her head slightly. *If only Mr. Katsuya had done a better job as team leader and stopped Miss Reina from running off in the first place! Then— But no, I'm just grumbling now. I should have been the first to stop her. Shifting the blame only means I need to do more self-reflection.*

◆

Eventually, a proper squad, including members of the recon and extermination teams, arrived to relieve the hunters. Leaders from both teams and an official from headquarters took charge and set about establishing a new checkpoint. The hum of conversation filled the air as scouts and exterminators began preparing to map and secure the area on the

other side of the tunnel.

Akira was ordered to clean the checkpoint's perimeter. It wasn't an arduous task, since all he had to do was carry dead scorpions to a designated spot. Leaving the floor littered with the massive bugs' corpses would interfere with the teams' ability to move around and bring in equipment, not to mention providing any new scorpions with perfect cover to play dead. Yet lugging the bodies all the way up to the surface was out of the question, so the group settled on heaping them in an out-of-the-way corner underground. Those Akira had killed were in no state to be carried, but the teams made plans to at least firm up the marshy ground.

These seem lighter than I thought they'd be, Akira remarked as he hauled away yet another arachnid corpse. *Or does my suit just make them seem that way?*

No, they really are lightweight, Alpha replied. *And I bet they'd get even lighter if you let them sit for a while.*

Sure enough, the bodies were growing considerably lighter. Despite their weighty appearance, the bugs' sturdy exoskeletons didn't even scrape or screech when he dragged them along the floor.

Why is that? Akira asked, puzzled.

Opinions differ. One theory is that Old World nanomachines accelerate decomposition. Some even speculate the colorless fog plays a part in it, and that the thicker it gets, the quicker bodies break down. Alpha seemed proud of her knowledge, and Akira gave her his full attention, fascinated. *The wasteland is always full of hunters killing monsters—so many you'd expect to see rotting animal carcasses everywhere. But you haven't passed many on your trips, have you?*

Now that you mention it, no. I haven't. I've seen plenty of skeletons, but I don't remember seeing anything rotting. Guess the bodies decompose too fast for that, then.

Of course, if you want to get into specifics, cleaning nanomachines might be the culprit down here. This was an underground mall back in the Old World, so I expect they released a lot of those. Alpha smiled slyly. *That would also explain why it's surprisingly hygienic for a monster-infested ruin. Otherwise, I bet the whole complex would smell* awful.

I'll bet it would. Akira grimaced, imagining the ruin thick with the stench of rotting corpses. *Well, good thing the place is clean. I don't have*

time to get hung up on every mystery. The East was full of strange phenomena, and—as most Easterners assumed—something from the Old World lay at the bottom of them. And for better or worse, Akira made the same assumption. Even if the cause turned out to be some dreadful agency at work, he would brush it off as commonplace.

Technologies that caused irreversible chaos, and wisdom that could destroy the world if misused: such things were everywhere out here, preserved as Old World relics. When modern humans became unable to resist those calamities, the civilization Akira called home would fall without a fight, its history absorbed into the Old World.

Yet Akira kept working, chatting idly with Alpha in the presence of one of the all-too-common mysteries of his homeland.

Once the scorpion corpses were safely taken care of, Akira took some time off at the checkpoint. For a while, he lined up his spare magazines on the floor, grimly tabulating his ammo reserves. Fighting another swarm of scorpions would be nearly impossible with his diminished supplies. Next time, he'd have to run—and get ready for Alpha to tear his legs off with his own suit along the way. But that wasn't the main reason for his scowl.

As he was thus occupied, headquarters called his terminal. Nervously, he answered, "This is Twenty-Seven."

"This is HQ. We've just about finished reviewing your battle logs, and we have a few questions for you."

"I'm not paying for that ammo. No way in hell!" was Akira's immediate response. Defensive and a little desperate, he knew he'd used—arguably wasted—a lot of expensive proprietary cartridges on the scorpions. If headquarters chewed him out for excess and demanded he foot the bill, he wouldn't be surprised.

The operator guessed Akira's worries. "That's okay," he replied, with a hint of amusement. "Your client will cover ammo costs; that hasn't changed. If they decide you're spending more than the situation calls for, the worst they'll do is cancel your contract and reduce your pay."

"Really?" Akira breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay then, whaddya need?"

"We know you killed a lot of Yarata scorpions, Twenty-Seven. But under the circumstances, we can't get an accurate count, so we'll pay you based on an estimate. Got any idea how we should calculate that?"

“I’m good as long as you don’t pull any bullshit like calling it zero ’cause the bodies are too messed up to count. Tally ’em up however you like and divide by three.”

The line went quiet for a moment.

“Are you sure about that?” the operator asked hesitantly.

“Is that a problem?” Akira asked back. He didn’t *think* he’d said anything strange, but now he figured he should double-check.

“No, it’s fine,” the operator replied after another brief hesitation. “We’ll do our own count and divide the result by three. I just wanted to be sure. After all, a lot of hunters start whining that they should be getting paid more *after* we’ve finished calculating kill counts and the payments are set in stone. For the record, you just gave your approval, so don’t come crying to us later. HQ out.”

Chapter 45: Katsuya's Frustration

Akira was happily stowing his magazines—his worries about ammo costs now a thing of the past—when Reina timidly approached him. Akira glanced up at her, then went back to packing. Katsuya's team accompanied her, as did Shiori, who appeared composed but inwardly was a mass of anxiety.

Reina almost said something to Akira, then hesitated, carefully choosing her words. At last, a little stiffly, she broke the silence. "Umm... HQ just called to go over our compensation for that battle, and they said we'll each get paid for a third of the estimated kill count. Do I have that right?"

"Yeah," Akira replied. "That's what I told 'em when they asked me."

Reina looked confused. Akira noticed, and a perplexed expression crossed his own face. Each pondered what the other must be thinking—never realizing that their thoughts were moving in opposite directions. Before they could clear up the misunderstanding, Akira drew his conclusion.

"You saying I shouldn't earn anything for that battle, since I already got paid to support you?" he demanded, disgruntled. "Sorry, but that's not gonna fly."

Akira's blatant hostility made Shiori even warier of him and put Katsuya's team on their guard.

For a moment, Reina was nonplussed. Then she frantically shook her head. "No! I didn't mean it like that! I meant the other way around!"

"What other way?" asked Akira.

"You killed most of those scorpions. A third each is way more than we'd get normally. Are you sure about this?"

"The three of us got the kills, so we split 'em three ways. What's so weird about that? If we were all paying for our own ammo, I'd say we should subtract those costs and then take equal shares of whatever's left over, but my client's covering mine. I don't wanna argue about that side of things—do you?"

“N-No, but—”

“Thirds it is, then. If we split pay for exterminations just based on kill count, scouts would be at a huge disadvantage. What hunter wants to hear they’re not getting paid because they found all the targets but didn’t kill any?” Akira felt genuinely impressed by Reina and Shiori’s work. Without them, he would have been caught between two scorpion swarms. And though they hadn’t discussed payment ahead of time, he couldn’t think of any split more likely to keep the peace among an impromptu team than equal shares.

Reina saw Akira’s point, but she still wasn’t satisfied. While she knew she’d pulled her weight, she didn’t believe her achievements equaled his. She stood poised to unleash a retort when Shiori stepped in.

“Miss, he’s already agreed to this division, and it doesn’t penalize us. I don’t believe you ought to force the issue. If you light a fuse, expect an explosion.”

“I...I understand,” Reina hastily agreed. Shiori’s insinuation that she might provoke Akira again made a lot of sense. “You’re right: there’s no sense arguing about it.”

“Is that all you wanted?” Akira asked.

“Yes, it is,” Shiori interjected as Reina opened her mouth. “We’re sorry to have bothered you. Miss, let’s be on our way.”

Reina didn’t know what to make of this, but she left, hurried along by Shiori.

“I, umm, tried to watch my words,” she said once she was out of earshot. “Did I still mess up?” She’d been careful to avoid antagonizing Akira, but Shiori’s attitude made her doubt herself.

“You certainly upset him without cause, even if only because he misunderstood you,” Shiori replied sternly. “I can assure you that you weren’t at fault, miss, but that is no excuse—you shouldn’t presume that everyone you speak with is sensible. Unforeseeable misunderstandings are an ever-present risk, and you won’t always be able to clear them up.”

“I was hoping to talk with him a little more, though.”

“You’ve already yelled at him on several occasions and even suggested that he’d be better off dead. I suggest you give him some time to cool off and then apologize before you try speaking with him again. You mustn’t expect him to laugh off your outbursts like Mr. Katsuya and his companions

do.”

“Y-You have a point. I’ll keep that in mind.” Reina wanted to ask Akira how well she’d fought and what he thought of her performance now, but it seemed she would have to wait. Once again, she regretted that her own behavior had cost her that opportunity.

But though Reina and Shiori had left Akira, the other Druncam hunters remained.

“If you, er, don’t mind my asking,” Katsuya said awkwardly, “what was all that about a support job?”

“You should ask them,” Akira replied.

The curt refusal irked Katsuya, but he reined in his temper and tried again. “We’re all with Druncam, working on a team together. I’m the leader, so I’d like to know what they were doing while they were away from us. I need to report to our higher-ups, for one thing, and it factors into our pay too. Would you mind filling me in?”

“Ask them,” Akira repeated, brushing him off once more.

“Is there something you can’t tell me?” Katsuya demanded more emphatically. “Why are you keeping secrets?”

“Just ask them. They’ll answer all your questions.”

Akira felt bound to honor his agreement with Shiori and Reina. And in his view, that meant keeping his dangerous altercation with them to himself. He also wasn't proud of the incident, so he was happy to let the women hide it if they wanted to. Not that he would mind if they chose to talk—he was ready to deal with any fresh trouble the revelation brought his way. Regardless, he still felt the choice was theirs to make, not his.

But to Katsuya, who didn't know the circumstances, Akira's calm silence just seemed surly. And the Druncam hunter's complicated feelings toward the other boy didn't help matters.

Yumina was equally in the dark, but the rapidly worsening tension between the two young hunters made her want to cradle her head in her hands. She knew exactly why Katsuya wanted Akira's side of the story: he was just worried about Reina. Knowing their teammate, they had fully expected her to gleefully boast about how many scorpions she'd killed, ignoring the fact that she and Shiori had left the group—and their posts—without orders. But Reina had hardly spoken at all. And far from boasting, she'd downplayed her own accomplishment, going so far as to question whether a third of the payment was more than she deserved.

So Katsuya suspected something had gone wrong, and, as team leader, he considered it his duty to find out. Yumina doubted his instincts here, but she wasn't sure what to do about that. She realized that Katsuya assumed he'd get a straight answer if all was well, and so he was losing patience with Akira's reticence. Yet she couldn't bring herself to stop Katsuya with her fists this time—he was just trying to be a good leader, and he wasn't far enough off the mark to merit a blow.

At the same time, she saw little hope of persuading Akira, who remained stubbornly closemouthed. She couldn't think of any argument that might get him to open up, and Katsuya was starting to dig his heels in too—he wouldn't back down easily. The way things were going, he might even start yelling and try to force the information out of Akira.

Yumina hesitated for a moment, then decided on a slightly unorthodox way of curbing her team leader. At least it would be better than a fight. "Katsuya, let's go. You're wasting your time talking to him."

"Yumina?" Katsuya looked startled. He thought he heard a harsh note in Yumina's voice, and she even seemed to eye Akira coldly. She almost never acted like this. He didn't realize she did so to calm Katsuya down—and to

ensure any retribution fell on her.

"You don't know anything about this guy," she went on. "Why should we believe anything he says?"

"W-Well, I guess that's true," Katsuya admitted, uncertainty beginning to sap his determination.

"Asking your teammates will be quicker, and you can trust them. So, let's go," Yumina pressed, smiling sweetly.

"I agree," Airi chimed in, speaking her mind. "You can't work with vague, unverified info."

Under their influence, Katsuya cooled off enough to think better of questioning Akira. He wouldn't get anything out of someone who made Yumina so prickly.

"Good point. Let's go." He turned on his heel, and Airi followed without another word.

Yumina, however, turned to Akira. He didn't seem to mind their behavior—he wasn't even looking at them—but she still bobbed her head by way of apology. Then she took off after her teammates.

That girl is smooth, Alpha commented, as imperturbably cheerful as ever. *All those walking trouble factories in one place, and she kept things from going south.*

You're exaggerating, Akira grumbled.

You think so?

At Alpha's insinuating smile, Akira did some reflecting. He hadn't been watching Katsuya's team, but he had noticed Yumina's bow—Alpha kept him aware of everything that went on around him. The girl had been courteous to him; perhaps he should have acted in kind, even just answering Katsuya's question with a simple "Nothing much."

After his quick break, Akira went back to standing watch while chatting with Alpha. Although he appeared tense and alert, he stood relaxed, propped up by his powered suit. A perceptive official noticed and decided to give him a warning.

So the official asked him a question—one only an attentive guard could answer. Akira got it right—naturally, as Alpha told him what to say.

"Oh, so you *were* doing your job," the official said, surprised. "Sorry I doubted you."

“Nah, I wouldn’t be surprised if I looked like I was slacking off,” Akira responded nonchalantly. “I *am* tired, so I might’ve been unsteady on my feet.” Beside him, and invisible to the official, Alpha was laughing.

“Oh, right. You’re the one who found the hole into the unexplored area. I heard you had a fight on your hands. Sorry, but hang in there a little longer till your shift ends.”

“Sure thing.”

As he watched the official leave, Alpha chuckled. *You sure fooled him.*

Why shouldn’t I? Akira grinned back. *Thanks a million; I couldn’t have done it without you. And I* am *doing my job, if only thanks to your support. But if that’s a problem, then I shouldn’t be here in the first place. I mean, I count on you for everything.*

True enough.

Akira knew he’d be dead weight without Alpha, and he planned to take all of her help he could get. Never mind if he’d made a single official doubt his instincts in the process. Alpha couldn’t care less, and Akira was too busy with his own problems to worry about other people. Even if someone had taken him to task for it, he considered one person’s lost confidence an acceptable loss, far preferable to letting scorpions get the drop on them. In the long run, this was the best way to support the other hunters he worked with.

The rest of Akira’s security shift passed uneventfully.

The nest extermination, and the accompanying efforts to explore and secure the tunnels beneath Kuzusuhara, continued round the clock. Subterranean monsters had no concept of day or night, so maintaining bases of operations in the underground required constant vigilance. Akira’s shifts were eight hours minimum—and he could stay down for up to twenty-four if he wanted to boost his earnings. Unsurprisingly, he planned to leave the moment his eight hours were up.

As soon as Alpha informed him he could clock out, he put in a call to headquarters. “This is Twenty-Seven. Come in, HQ.”

“HQ here,” a voice responded. “What’s the problem?”

“My shift should be ending. Send someone to take over for me.”

“Hang on, lemme check. Twenty-Seven, Twenty-Seven... Yeah, you’ve worked your minimum. Roger that. Your checkpoint’s not short-staffed, so you’re free to just leave. Be seeing you.”

“Where should I return my terminal?”

“You can hang onto it until your contract’s up, but if you’re worried about losing it, leave it with an employee at the temporary base. Or if you can’t be bothered, take it home with you and report to the first floor of this building tomorrow. If you lose the terminal, don’t worry; we’ll just deduct the cost from your payment. They’re mass-produced, and we’ve got plenty of spares. Lots of hunters break ’em while they’re fighting.”

“Roger. I’ll head home for today. Over.”

“Careful on your way home. You won’t get paid for any fights after you clock out. See you. HQ out.” Headquarters ended the call, and Akira’s workday ended with it. But since he’d signed on for at least a week, he had six more days ahead of him—six more like this one, if his bad luck held.

Good work! You survived another day, Alpha happily piped up. *One down, six to go. Let’s make them count.*

Today’s not over yet, Akira responded. *I can’t relax until I’m back in the city, or at least the temporary base—or at the* very *least, above ground. Your scouting will be back to normal once I get clear of the underground, right?*

Right. And good on you for not letting your guard down. That’s a sign of growth.

A frank compliment from Alpha? Akira decided he could get used to that.

He was just about to hurry home when he caught a glimpse of Katsuya’s team. They had arrived at the underground checkpoint before him, so he was a little surprised to see them still around.

Those guys haven’t left yet? he wondered.

They don’t lack for enthusiasm, I’ll give them that. Or maybe their contracts are just different from yours. Well, either way, it’s got nothing to do with us.

True enough. Let’s get moving. I’m dying for a bath. Akira set off in high spirits.

Only after your weapon maintenance, Alpha reminded him. *Considering how tired you are, you might fall asleep without giving your rifles a proper cleaning if you bathe first.*

Couldn’t I put that off till tomorrow? he ventured, knowing it was in vain.

No, Alpha said, crushing his hopes with a smile.

Oh, all right. Akira hung his head and sighed. Alpha found his dejection amusing.

◆

Reina had no particular reason to watch Akira—none she was aware of, at least—but she found her gaze following him as he walked off. Katsuya noticed.

"Something wrong, Reina?" he asked.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing," she answered. Nevertheless, she seemed in good spirits; the annoyance she'd shown at Checkpoint Fourteen was gone without a trace.

"You're sure?" Katsuya pressed, puzzled by her transformation.

Reina wasn't used to this level of attention from Katsuya but didn't give his manner much thought. "Well, I guess I was thinking how people who started work after us are already leaving," she admitted, her tone souring as she remembered she was stuck down here. "Where's our relief?"

"Th-They're coming. You know I asked them to hurry," Katsuya reassured her, kicking himself for stirring up this hornet's nest.

Druncam's contract with the city specified that the syndicate would provide relief for its own hunters. So, unlike Akira, they couldn't just leave even when their checkpoint was fully manned.

"You've been saying that for two hours," Reina retorted. "You'd better at least be checking on them." The more she thought about things, the madder she got. When she'd fought alongside Akira, she'd held nothing back; now the fatigue was catching up to her. And though she'd been resting in shifts, sitting on the hard floor didn't offer much rest. Exhaustion did nothing to improve her mood.

"They took their time deciding who to send, but our reliefs are on their way now," Katsuya said, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. "It shouldn't be much longer."

"Calm down and be patient," Yumina added. "Blaming Katsuya won't make this any faster."

"It's not his fault," Airi weighed in tersely.

Reina felt her face tensing up. In the past, these clumsy attempts to calm

her down would have been her cue to throw a fit. Her teammates grimaced, expecting her to start screaming her head off. But to their surprise, she clamped her mouth shut, biting back her outburst, and then exhaled deeply.

"You're right," she said. "Sorry."

It was a jaw-dropping moment for Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi.

"What are those looks for?" Reina demanded, with renewed annoyance. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Nope, no problems here," Katsuya hastily replied. "Right?"

"Huh? Of course not," said Yumina.

"We're glad you've stopped losing it over every little thing," Airi added.

This last remark did make Reina scowl, but nothing worse; and after a few breaths to calm herself, she was back to her earlier good mood. Akira had said he wouldn't hire her for free—just about the worst assessment she could imagine—and had refused to take it back even when Shiori threatened him. Yet he'd given them even shares of the reward for that massive encounter like it was a matter of course. She'd seen what he could do, and the feeling that he considered her worthy of equal pay made her positively giddy.

Watching her, Katsuya turned to Yumina and whispered, "So, what do you think *really* happened?"

"Beats me," she replied. "But something sure did, and it must have been good."

"She told me she held her own against a swarm of Yarata scorpions. But if that's all, why would that guy hide it?" Katsuya had spoken to Reina again after his conversation with Akira, and she had described a battle worth bragging about. Shiori had confirmed her report. Still, Katsuya couldn't shake the feeling they were hiding something.

Yumina had gotten a similar impression, but she saw no need to pry. "Is that still bugging you, Katsuya?" she asked. "Let it rest already. Sure, she left her post without permission, but she came back with the kills to show for it."

"Well, yeah, but—"

"If you have to brood, brood about how you couldn't stop Reina and Shiori from running off. You failed as a leader there."

Katsuya grimaced—this was another hornet's nest he should have left alone. But this distraction wasn't enough to dispel his misgivings. Yumina

could see this and was anxious to ensure this hang-up wouldn't cause problems down the road. So, mentally apologizing to Reina, she whispered something she herself didn't believe into Katsuya's ear.

"Ooooh, yeah. I guess that could be it," Katsuya agreed. "No wonder he kept his mouth shut."

Fighting off a scorpion swarm with a small team would normally be terrifying. Yumina's simple suggestion—that Reina might have wet herself—sounded entirely plausible to Katsuya. If Akira were perceptive, he would have noticed and, like most people, felt disinclined to talk about it afterward.

Katsuya's gaze strayed to Reina's crotch.

"Mr. Katsuya?" Shiori's chilly voice intruded on his thoughts.

"Yes?!" Katsuya instinctively snapped to attention.

"I would *greatly* appreciate it if you would hasten our relief."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Katsuya hurried off to speed up their replacements, his lingering doubts entirely forgotten. The whispered suggestion didn't square perfectly with his original suspicions, but it left a strong enough impression to overwrite them.

Yumina's and Shiori's eyes met. Both conveyed the same message: *I'll let it slide this time.*

Chapter 46: Recon Team Nine

The next day found Akira headed back to the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, to the vast lobby of the same building he'd reported to previously. Along the way he stopped by Cartridge Freak and replaced the bullets he'd fired so lavishly in the tunnels. The rate at which he went through proprietary CWH cartridges alarmed Shizuka, although he managed to placate her—he assured her he hadn't fought alone, and he'd used all that powerful ammo because he'd stuck to attacking from a safe distance. All of which was perfectly true; he just neglected to mention he'd been in so much danger there'd been no other choice.

Shizuka seemed to suspect something, but she didn't press him for details. Instead, she sent Akira on his way with a brief hug, a smile, and an injunction to avoid risks and come home safe. That was all she could do, since telling him not to go wasn't an option.

In the first-floor headquarters that oversaw the hunters underground, Akira found the same official from the day before waiting for him.

"There you are, Twenty-Seven," the man said. "Pick your poison: recon or extermination."

"Security's off the table?" Akira asked, puzzled. He'd been offered security or recon before. "I'd like another day of that, if it's an option."

"No can do. You performed too well yesterday for that. You're officially too good to waste as a scarecrow at some checkpoint, so it's recon or extermination. Aren't you glad to be making a name for yourself?"

"Well, if that impressed you, I wish you'd focus on how good a security guard I was."

"Tough. This decision comes from higher up, so it's no use crying to me. Now quit stalling and pick one." After a moment, the official added, "Oh, and they're about equally dangerous, so no real difference there."

Akira frowned and racked his brain. Would he rather stalk warily through uncharted halls and maybe end up in another mess, or charge into a nest where he could be sure he'd be fighting hordes of scorpions? He

couldn’t decide.

If you work recon, you can stay out of fights as long as you scout well enough, Alpha supplied, realizing that he’d agonize over the choice forever if left to his own devices. *On the other hand, you might be forced into battles you don’t expect. On the extermination team, you can count on having enough firepower to deal with anything you run into, but you’ll definitely have to fight. If you want a large team to reliably handle situations like yesterday, I recommend extermination.*

“Recon, please,” said Akira.

“Sure,” the official responded. “There, all set. Follow your terminal’s directions to Checkpoint Nineteen and do what the people in charge there tell you.”

“Understood.”

The official watched Akira go with a look of ambivalence. “‘Recommended by: Kibayashi. Munitions reimbursement approved by: Kibayashi. Placement supervisor: Kibayashi,’” he muttered, scanning the boy’s records on his terminal. “This has gotta be *that* Kibayashi. And if the kid’s caught *his* eye, I don’t know whether to envy or pity him. That guy’s crazy for reckless stunts.”

Akira had crossed Kibayashi’s path when the city had come under threat in the middle of a routine patrol job. Since he worked for both the Hunter Office and Kugamayama, Kibayashi had enough authority to call the shots on this underground extermination. And he had made himself fairly infamous. “Live fast and die fast”—that was how he thought life should be lived. He saw hunting as the perfect showcase for his philosophy, and he’d earned an unfavorable reputation for going overboard in his exuberance to help any hunter who embodied that ideal.

Kibayashi sought out hunters he thought were spoiling for a chance to prove their skills, supplying them with high-risk, high-return jobs that could turn their fortunes around. Most crashed and burned, dazzled by the charms of reckless gambles that could end only in spectacular triumph or utter defeat. They lost, and the wasteland swallowed them.

The winners were rewarded with yet more opportunities—jobs with so much potential for profit that they couldn’t bring themselves to refuse, despite the risks to life and limb. There were many hunters whose innate talents would have made them immensely successful if they’d taken things

slow and steady; under Kibayashi's encouragement, however, they typically ended up winning glory in a flash and then dying in their rush to claim more. But despite his reputation, the radiance of the victors who had made their fortunes with his aid tempted many hunters into accepting his offers.

"Is the kid lucky he has the chance to gamble at all, or unlucky 'cause he would've lived longer without it?" the official murmured, a hint of sympathy touching his expression. "Beats me. But if you gamble long enough, you're bound to lose sometime."

Akira had been playing the odds since the day he'd become a hunter. So far, with Alpha's help, he'd won every game.

Akira, why did you choose the recon team? Alpha asked as they traversed the subterranean passages. *I think extermination was your best bet of avoiding another mess like yesterday.*

But it'd mean another fight I'd have to burn through proprietary ammo to survive, right? Akira answered. *I know my client's footing the bill, but I wanna steer clear of situations where I have to rely on so many of those CWH cartridges.*

Alpha fixed him with a stare.

What? he added defensively. *I get that I'd rack up a lot more combat experience working extermination, but that won't matter if I get myself killed. Besides, I can only carry so much ammo around with me.*

Stocking up on pricey ammo at Cartridge Freak is good for Shizuka's bottom line. But the more you buy, the more she worries. Alpha mused, *I suppose you care more about the latter.*

Akira didn't respond, though his silence spoke volumes.

I don't have a problem with your choice, Alpha continued. *But if you want my advice, the best way to ensure Shizuka's peace of mind is to get skilled enough to blow away a Yarata scorpion swarm without breaking a sweat.*

Another moment of silence followed. Then, gruffly, Akira conceded, *You've got a point.*

Checkpoint Nineteen was a bare-bones installation situated in a vast underground hall. It had been established recently to secure the uncharted zones around it, and a large force of hunters had been stationed to guard key

locations in the vicinity. The recon and extermination teams also used it as a rest stop, adding to the lively crowd.

A group of armed city officials issued orders from the center of the hall. Akira's terminal directed him straight toward them, and the man who seemed to be in charge soon noticed his approach.

"You must be Twenty-Seven," said the official. "The recon team you'll be joining is out scouting right now. Sit tight until they get back. I don't care what you do, as long as you don't leave this room. Stand guard if you get bored, and kill any scorpions you see."

"Got it," Akira responded and left in search of an unoccupied space.

The official made a call. "This is Checkpoint Nineteen. Come in, Recon Team Nine."

"This is Recon Team Nine," a woman's voice answered from his terminal. "It's not time for our regular contact yet. Is something wrong?"

"The additional member you requested is here. Come on back and pick him up if you need him."

"He'd better be good," a man's voice cut in. "We're all set on scouts; what we need is firepower."

"Don't be picky," said the official. "But he killed his fair share of scorpions yesterday, so I doubt you have to worry. If you don't want him, take the previous bunch back out with you instead—I only got you this guy 'cause you complained."

"I'd rather have nobody than bring *them* along" was the man's snide response.

"We'll head back for now," the woman's voice resumed. "Get ready to receive the data we've collected. Recon out."

The official turned to his subordinates. "Recon Team Nine's on its way back. Prepare to transmit their findings to HQ. Make sure they know to at least receive the data, even if they're not done converting the last batch."

"Yes, sir."

The official next shifted his gaze to the terminal in his hand, which displayed Akira's records. He frowned slightly as he reread them, then dismissed his worries with a muttered "Well, it should be fine. He definitely pulled his weight in combat yesterday."

The name of Akira's sponsor was the source of his concern. The boy didn't seem strong enough to win one of Kibayashi's reckless gambles, and

a loss would leave the rest of them holding the bag. Yet he couldn't turn Akira away, since Kibayashi outranked him, so he put his faith in the young hunter's record. That made him feel better. And even if someone had altered the records, he wouldn't be held responsible for the fallout.

Unlike Checkpoint Fourteen, most of the area around Checkpoint Nineteen was shrouded in darkness. Akira had arrived by a brightly lit route, but inky, subterranean blackness stretched out unbroken in every other direction. Either there simply weren't enough lights, or the hunters had chosen not to install them until they finished mapping the passages and clearing out any lurking scorpions—Akira had no idea which.

He looked over the hunters standing guard or resting nearby and saw some familiar faces: Katsuya's team.

They got posted here too, huh? he said.

Looks like it, Alpha responded. *And now that we know that, I suggest you move farther away from them.*

What for?

Because a meeting between you will end in trouble.

Fine, Akira sheepishly agreed. He couldn't refute her, so he headed to the opposite side of the checkpoint from the Druncam group. Time passed while he stood guard, and he began to wonder if he could get away with hanging around the checkpoint until his minimum shift was over. A familiar voice from behind him dashed those hopes.

"Akira!"

He turned and saw Sara waving cheerfully to him. Walking over, he nodded in greeting and said, "Long time no see. Are you and Elena working this job too?"

"Yup," she replied. "Technically, we signed on to guard the temporary base, but we got reassigned down here in a hurry. Still, you're our new member? I didn't see that coming."

"I am? So, the team I'm supposed to be joining is..."

"The same one Elena and I are on, yes. She's the leader. I'll take you to her."

Sara led Akira to the center of the vast chamber, where Elena was discussing something with the city officials. Elena casually waved him over as soon as she spotted him.

“Welcome to Recon Team Nine,” she said, with mock formality. “I’m Elena, your new leader.”

“My name is Akira. It’s a pleasure to work with you,” he answered, equally courteous. Then they both chuckled.

“Funny, I never expected you to be our new member,” Elena added. “I’ll do my best to watch your back, but this is a dangerous job, so tread carefully. We’ll be charting unexplored zones, so of course there’s no telling what kinds of monsters are out there. Stay on your toes and be ready for anything.”

“I understand. I’ll be careful not to slow you down.”

“Good, that’s the spirit! But play it safe and rely on us when things get dicey. Shizuka would be devastated if something happened to you.”

“I know. I’ll be counting on you when the time comes.”

Elena smiled, satisfied that Akira didn’t seem overeager or anxious. Her concerns allayed, she returned to transferring the data she’d gathered on her scouting expedition to the officials. She’d recorded most of her findings using her own sensors, which boasted far greater precision than her work terminal could manage. But her scanner stored data in a different format than the loaned device, so its output needed to undergo conversion for use by the city. In most cases, the officials would discard nonstandard data to save themselves the hassle. Elena’s, however, was useful enough to justify the extra effort. And because the transfer and conversion took some time, she explained to Akira, her team would be on standby for a while.

“So, your data gets special treatment?” Akira said when she’d finished filling him in. “I knew you were amazing.”

His frank praise embarrassed Elena slightly, although she didn’t mind the compliment. “I’m glad you appreciate the importance of scouting,” she responded, a little boastfully. “A lot of hunters don’t, you know? They figure they can just take out any monsters they’re too careless to spot ahead of time. And they march into ruins full of twists and turns, convinced they won’t get lost—or at least that they’ll find their way out quickly if they do.”

“Really?” Akira asked, surprised. “I can’t believe anyone thinks your job doesn’t matter. I’d rather not fight any monsters I can avoid, and losing my way in a ruin isn’t my idea of a good time either.”

Everyone had their own idea of what made a capable hunter, but most overvalued the brute force needed to slaughter powerful monsters with ease.

Combat ability wasn't just useful; it was also straightforward enough to make for good self-publicity. That led some to dismiss scouts, who didn't engage their enemies directly. Elena had had a number of unpleasant experiences with that sort of disdain.

But during Akira's forays into Kuzusuhara, Alpha's grasp of threats and terrain had been practically the only thing keeping him alive. So he'd gained a healthy appreciation for the value of a good scout.

"You'd be surprised how many there are," Elena replied, in an even better mood now that she sensed Akira's respect for her work was genuine. "And they're always full of complaints too. I can't stand them." Scowling, she vented her frustrations at length. Eventually, however, she realized that she'd gone from sharing her experience to simply griping, and that sitting through an endless litany of complaints probably wasn't much fun for Akira.

"Just so you know, Sara is the muscle of our team, but that doesn't mean I can't fight," she said, changing tack. "My scanners improve my accuracy, and with my new powered suit, I've got no trouble handling heavy weapons. I wouldn't want you to think I can't hold my own in a firefight just because I specialize in scouting."

"Oh, that's right," Akira said. "You started wearing a suit the other day."

"I have my instruments to carry, so my weapons are still lighter than Sara's, but they do pack more than enough firepower to..."

The mention of Elena's suit reminded Akira that he'd seen her wearing it at Shizuka's store. Many would probably find the skintight garment quite provocative, accentuating as it did her every alluring curve. She had blushed furiously, flustered to be seen in it.

Then that memory recalled another one: Alpha's lifelike, computer-generated recreation of a naked Elena. Which in turn called to mind Alpha's similar treatment of Sara. Their entrancing, unclothed figures had left a strong impression on his memory.

By the time he realized he was following a risky train of thought, it was too late—he was reliving the scene. He shook his head to clear the image from his mind, but he couldn't shake off the agitation that had come with it. It didn't take Elena long to put two and two together and figure out that he was thinking about seeing her at Cartridge Freak.

Akira was doing his best to appear calm, so Elena did likewise. Yet she

couldn’t quite pull it off—his embarrassment proved infectious. Their conversation faltered, and both chuckled to cover their awkwardness.

Sara laughed at them both. She’d heard Shizuka’s account of the suit incident, so she could guess the reason for Akira’s attitude. And she got a kick out of seeing this unusual side of her best friend, even if she felt guilty about it. Of course, she had no idea he was picturing her naked too.

“By the way,” Akira said, desperate to force the conversation into a different channel, “how many people are on your recon team?”

“Four, including you,” Elena replied, following his lead.

“Four? Is that normal? It sounds a little, er, small to me. Wouldn’t it be better to bring more people along?”

He’d been forced to fend off a scorpion swarm with just a team of three the day before. As far as he was concerned, he’d survived by the skin of his teeth. And the unexplored tunnels were riddled with more nests than he could count. Recon’s main job was to investigate, not exterminate; but four people still seemed too few for comfort. Even allowing that Elena’s team might be skilled enough to breeze through most any difficulties, he couldn’t accept that number without an explanation.

Elena and Sara knit their brows and exchanged looks. Akira didn’t know what was on their minds, but he could tell it wasn’t good.

“We originally planned to go out with a slightly larger party,” Sara explained, frowning. “Only, it didn’t quite work out.”

“What happened?” Akira asked.

Elena grimaced. “Our team members weren’t exactly compatible. Not the rarest problem, but I wish they’d worked it out ahead of time.”

“Sorry about that. I’ll put in a complaint about that personnel issue too,” the last member of the team cut in. He was a Druncam hunter like Katsuya’s team and had once been their supervisor, although he now operated independently. “Name’s Shikarabe, and I’m a member of Recon Team Nine. You the new hunter they assigned us?”

Akira inclined his head politely. “My name’s Akira. I’m glad to be working with you today.”

“I’d appreciate some help, but I don’t want dead weight,” Shikarabe responded, sizing the boy up. “Can you cut it?”

“If you decide I can’t, save your complaints for HQ,” Akira answered, unruffled by the man’s incendiary tone. “They’re the ones who sent me

here, after all. Maybe they'll send you someone better if you bug them enough."

Shikarabe looked taken aback. Akira's answer was the polar opposite of what he'd expected. The boy was about Katsuya's age, and he had to be fairly skilled if headquarters had sent him here alone. Young hotshots like that usually overestimated themselves. So Shikarabe had anticipated a confident boast, or maybe an annoyed complaint that anyone dared to doubt the boy's competence. But Akira didn't seem to mind if the older hunter had a low opinion of his skill.

"You don't sound too sure of yourself. Think you're not up to the job?" Shikarabe demanded, hiding his surprise behind a show of disdain.

But Akira remained calm. "I don't know what you're hoping for. But I don't think I'm strong enough to promise I can handle *everything* that comes our way, or that you've got nothing to worry about while I'm around. So if that's what you mean, then yeah, I guess I'm not too sure of myself."

Shikarabe exhaled and brightened. "Sorry about that. I'm used to dealing with a lot of overconfident idiots. But at least it sounds like you're not one of them, so you should do fine. I doubt HQ'd be stupid enough to send you here if you couldn't handle yourself."

In point of fact, Akira didn't look all that strong to Shikarabe. But Elena and Sara seemed to welcome the boy, and headquarters vouched for him, so Shikarabe deduced he couldn't be completely useless.

"I'm all ready to go," the man added. "Let me know whenever you decide to head out."

"We'll leave as soon as I finish delivering this," Elena said, checking how long her terminal would take to transfer the remaining data. "About five minutes to go. Does that work for you, Akira?"

"Fine by me. I could go now if you wanted," Akira replied. Then, he noticed Alpha pointing and turned to look. "Huh?"

Katsuya was heading their way, and the rest of his team wasn't far behind. Once again, Shiori's maid outfit was drawing attention to the group, but that wasn't the reason for the disgruntled scowl on Katsuya's face.

Chapter 47: Elena's Decision

The appearance of Katsuya's team was an unwelcome intrusion into the light conversation between Akira, Elena, and the rest of Recon Team Nine. Until then, they'd been happily catching up with each other while waiting to resume their expedition. But when Alpha alerted Akira to the new arrivals and he turned to look at them, the rest followed suit, and the conversation died down. Shikarabe scowled, Elena sighed, and Sara cracked a rueful grin.

I shouldn't have to tell you this, but don't cause any trouble, Alpha cautioned.

I know, Akira responded. *Though I doubt those guys will start anything with Elena and Sara around anyway.*

But a stern look from Alpha snapped him out of his optimism. She was worried about what *he* would do, not the other young hunters. Akira resolved to be on his best behavior.

Elena turned to Shikarabe. "Can we count on you to smooth out any disputes within Druncam?"

"Of course," he answered with assurance. "Whatever they say, leave me to deal with it."

Sara noticed the puzzled look on Akira's face and realized he was out of the loop as far as their history with Katsuya's team was concerned. "Remember when Elena said we were supposed to have a bigger team, but personality conflicts torpedoed that plan?" she explained, with forced cheerfulness. "Shikarabe refused to work with Katsuya's group."

As Sara recounted, she and Elena had signed on to support the construction of the forward base, running patrols and intercepting monsters as a team of two. Druncam had dispatched Shikarabe and his colleagues on a similar assignment. They'd arrived to find the base construction site full of workers clearing debris and laying roads, all to secure a route into the heart of Kuzusuhara. Tanks and other heavy vehicles couldn't traverse the rubble-strewn streets of the ruins, and many monsters lurked inside

skyscrapers, where bulky mechs couldn't get at them. Kugamayama City had solved that problem by hiring a legion of hunters. Inevitably, the city had stationed the best on the front line, where they could contend with the more powerful threats that emerged as the serviced roadway stretched deeper into the ruins.

But then the Yarata scorpion swarms had appeared in the outskirts, where the city had expected to find only weak opposition. And to make matters worse, the underground shopping districts where the arachnids lurked turned out to be littered with their nests. The vast network of tunnels, it seemed, might even connect to deeper areas of Kuzusuhara. And so, just when the base's commanders had been assembling hunters to establish lines of communication, they'd found themselves forced to commit some of those personnel to securing the subterranean areas. That was how Elena, Sara, and Shikarabe had ended up underground.

All three were competent hunters who had worked on the base's front line—more than capable of forming a functioning recon team along with a few assistants recruited on site. And since Shikarabe was a member of Druncam, they had planned to fill out their group with more of the syndicate's personnel. But then they'd hit a snag—Druncam had sent Katsuya's team, and Shikarabe had been dead set against accepting them. To get his way, he had given both Elena and Druncam an ultimatum: he would leave if Katsuya and his group joined the team—but if they didn't, he would take responsibility for all the work they would have done. He'd even promised to act as a decoy and let Elena and Sara escape without him if worse came to worst.

Since both Shikarabe and the young hunters belonged to the same syndicate, headquarters had treated the matter as an internal squabble. So Shikarabe's demands had won out—he was, after all, both the better hunter and more respected within the organization.

While Elena and Sara brought Akira up to speed with the situation, Shikarabe was arguing with Katsuya.

"Enough is enough!" the young hunter snapped, glaring at his former supervisor. "You're not my boss anymore, and I don't have to take orders from you! Don't you realize how much harder your ego trip is making this on Elena and Sara?"

"Less than you'd make it if you tagged along," Shikarabe shot back, not

even trying to hide his contempt. “Get lost, and don’t bother us again till you figure that out.”

Neither showed any inclination to compromise, and a resolution was nowhere in sight.

Katsuya had been overjoyed at the prospect of working with Elena and Sara. And though he hadn’t relished Shikarabe’s presence, he’d intended to put up with it. But now the older hunter stood between him and that chance, and the boy was furious. Yet he realized merely shouting would get him nowhere.

“Are you going to keep exploring down here with just three people?” he demanded, scowling. “Druncam won’t send you someone else just ’cause you don’t like me. You can’t dig in your heels forever.”

Katsuya had reported Shikarabe’s extremely personal objections to Druncam management, hoping the higher-ups would get the older hunter to see reason. Instead, he’d been told the two had to work it out themselves. Shikarabe was an accomplished veteran, while Katsuya was becoming the face of the new generation—management wasn’t eager to put its foot down on either of them. As far as Katsuya was concerned, however, his bosses had taken Shikarabe’s side—as well they knew. So to balance the scales, and to get Katsuya off their backs, the syndicate had refused to send replacements.

The reconnaissance team operated in uncharted areas of the underground, where there was no such thing as too much firepower. Once Shikarabe got a fresh taste of how dangerous this job could be, Katsuya had reasoned, the veteran would become more receptive to his help. With Recon Team Nine back from its first foray, he approached them again, expecting to be welcomed with open arms.

But Shikarabe was unmoved. “Oh, don’t worry about that.” He laughed. “HQ found us a new member. Meet Akira—our client’s mighty impressed with the number of scorpions he wiped out yesterday.”

Katsuya turned to stare at Akira, thunderstruck. Akira was already looking away. But the look on Katsuya’s face still showed exactly what he was thinking: *You again?*

Yumina, Airi, Reina, and Shiori were equally surprised, although each took it differently.

“He’s not with Druncam,” Katsuya pointed out, forcing himself to

remain calm and return his attention to Shikarabe.

"So what?" the man responded. "HQ picked him out for us, so we've got nothing to worry about. Besides, Elena and Sara aren't Druncam hunters either."

"You're supposed to give other Druncam hunters priority when you need backup on a promising job! That's the rule!"

"That doesn't mean I've gotta bust my ass lugging dead weight along just to give it a cut of my pay—although I can see how you'd make that mistake, considering you're used to me babying you." Shikarabe's tone had been belittling, but now it turned abruptly serious. He intimidated Katsuya as only a seasoned hunter could. "I'll admit you're a full-fledged hunter now—you don't need a minder anymore. But that doesn't make you my equal. Learn the difference and get out of my face, or I'll mark you as an enemy and act accordingly."

Katsuya flinched. He was used to Shikarabe treating him like an unruly child, not a potential threat.

Then Yumina grabbed his hand. When he turned to face her, she shook her head gravely. She realized that, although Shikarabe had always brushed Katsuya off as a nuisance beneath his notice, the older hunter would crush his former charge if the boy pushed his luck any further. If her silent plea didn't stop Katsuya, she was ready to use her fists—it would be the lesser of two evils, since her punch would merely injure, while Shikarabe might kill. She doubted the veteran would show mercy to "dead weight" if he saw it as a threat to his life.

Katsuya fell silent, and so did Shikarabe. And since they had been the only ones arguing, the disturbance ended there.

"It's time," Elena said tersely. "Let's move." She started walking. Sara and Akira followed her lead.

Shikarabe paused to give Katsuya a withering look, then joined them. The boy gave him an even worse impression than usual—if this waste of time hadn't ended before the data transfer did, it would have delayed the whole team.

Katsuya watched the group leave in silent frustration.

Reina watched the entire scene play out from her position at the rear of Katsuya's team.

“Hey, Shiori,” she whispered, “did...did I act like that yesterday?”

“Perhaps worse, miss, if you’ll pardon my saying so,” Shiori replied.

“O-Oh.” Reina smiled ruefully, resolving once again to learn from her mistakes.

◆

Akira scowled as he stalked through the underground with Recon Team Nine. The subterranean passages were a lightless maze crawling with monsters, whose number and variety were unknown. Sending exterminators down here unprepared would be a waste of life—hence the need for scouts to chart the dangerous tunnels and catalog their denizens, securing the bare minimum of safety for the forces to follow. That was the task assigned to Elena and her team—and now to Akira.

They all wore lights, but the illumination did little to unveil the vast halls. Anything even a short distance from the hunters remained shrouded in darkness, which they all probed with their scanners as they gingerly advanced.

Elena walked in the center of the group, with Shikarabe ahead, Sara on her left flank, and Akira on her right. Soon, however, Akira began to gradually fall behind. Alpha had him doing at least some of his own scouting as an extension of his training. He found this a lot easier than doing everything himself, but at his skill level, he still struggled to avoid slowing down the whole group—even though, unbeknownst to him, Elena had dropped the party’s pace to gauge his ability.

The expedition took a greater mental and physical toll on him than he’d anticipated. Not only was he not up to the task, he was also painfully aware of his inadequacy and determined not to make himself a burden on the rest of the team.

Alpha observed his plight and decided to change up her approach. *That’s enough scouting practice, Akira. Take a little breather while I watch your back.*

All right, he responded. *Honestly, I was at my limit. Thanks.* In his relief, he let out a deep breath.

Without warning, Shikarabe called to him from the front of the group. “Hey, what’s up on our right?”

“Three Yarata scorpions fifty meters off,” Akira replied after a brief hesitation. “They’re not moving, so they’re probably dead. They could be faking, but they’re not in our way or moving toward us, so I think we can ignore them.”

Shikarabe looked to Elena for confirmation. To his surprise, she said simply, “He’s right.”

“Good to know,” he responded. “Sorry for testing you, Akira. I thought you’d started slacking off all of a sudden, but it sounds like you’re on the ball.” He looked puzzled as he faced forward again, muttering, “Maybe my instinct’s lost its edge.”

No, it’s razor sharp, Akira thought, doing his best to act calm while he waited for his heart rate to return to normal. Shikarabe had known he’d let his focus slip without even looking at him—giving Akira a hint of an expert hunter’s skill.

How do you think he figured it out, Alpha? he asked.

Probably by instinct, like he said, she replied.

Instinct, huh? That doesn’t tell me a lot.

His five senses and his scanner picked up a slight change in your movements, from which he deduced you’d relaxed. He calls it “instinct” because Shikarabe himself doesn’t understand how he figured it out.

Oh, that’s what you meant. I guess he’s pretty amazing, then.

Keep working hard, and I’ll make sure that someday, you’ll be able to do that too. Alpha beamed confidently.

Akira gritted his teeth, struggling to suppress an answering grin; he ended up looking stone-faced.

Shikarabe hadn’t been trying to reprimand Akira. He’d asked his question to gauge how much he would need to compensate for the boy’s shortcomings. The young hunter was there to provide much-needed firepower—the rest of them could cover for his deficiencies as a scout. Shikarabe would simply pay a little extra attention to their right flank himself if he deemed it necessary. But Akira’s nearly perfect answer seemed to say that he shouldn’t have worried.

Elena and Sara were also surprised. Akira’s ability to detect threats was unbelievable—seemingly almost on par with Elena’s. The only reason they weren’t as shocked as Shikarabe was that they could guess how he’d done it.

“We hit the jackpot with you,” Shikarabe said, in high spirits. “We asked for a fighter and got another good scout too. Ditching Katsuya sure paid off.”

“I wish you’d leave Akira and us out of Druncam’s internal squabbles,” Elena responded sharply.

“Lighten up, leader. I’m taking point to make up for it, aren’t I? And remember, you agreed with me in the end.”

Akira shot a startled look at Elena. Sure, Shikarabe was probably strong, but strong enough for Elena to pick him over a team of five, or to do the work of that many people? Akira couldn’t see it. Still, she *had* chosen Shikarabe, so he couldn’t help wondering why.

“It’s not like I took your side,” Elena said, a touch defensively. “I just considered the problems we’d run into if we swapped you out for Katsuya’s team.” She listed a few unremarkable points, largely excuses: numbers could make up for the loss of Shikarabe’s firepower, but only when the terrain allowed for it; a larger group couldn’t move as quickly and was more likely to alert monsters; and so on. Then, with some reluctance, she revealed the decisive factor. “And...I couldn’t be completely sure Katsuya’s team would follow my orders in an emergency.”

“Elena’s a bit of a worrywart, but she has everyone’s safety at heart,” Sara added, chuckling at the renewed surprise on Akira’s face. “This team was thrown together on the spur of the moment, and the bigger it gets, the more likely we are to argue over the chain of command. Try not to take it the wrong way.”

“It’s not that,” Akira responded seriously, shaking his head. “I just always assumed there was safety in numbers, and I was surprised to find out that’s a rookie mistake. I wasn’t second-guessing Elena or anything like that. I think whatever she decides is probably right.”

“I’m with you there,” Shikarabe added cheerfully. “Elena knows what she’s doing. You’ve probably heard that those kids caused a mess yesterday too.”

But Akira’s look said that he didn’t, so the older hunter elaborated further, hoping the boy would agree with him. The previous day, Reina had picked pointless fights with other hunters and then run off and left her post without permission. Her team leader, Katsuya, had proved unable to stop her. Headquarters had overheard their bickering at Checkpoint Fourteen via

the communication relay, and the news had also reached Druncam. Looking at the big picture, grafting any part of that team onto another command structure abruptly was doomed to fail. Force the issue, and the unit's ability to work as a group might break down somewhere deep under the ruins. So, Shikarabe declared in closing, taking Katsuya's team along was out of the question.

"Setting aside how accurate that story is," Elena added, with a sigh, "the less of that we have to worry about, the better. That's the biggest reason I didn't bring Katsuya's team along."

The experienced hunters' arguments convinced Akira. Of course, by that logic, bringing him on this expedition was an equally terrible idea—he'd made sure his contract gave him free rein to act as he saw fit in an emergency, and he intended to take full advantage of the fact. But that wouldn't become a problem this time—not with Elena as his team leader.

"Akira, I'll do my best to give good orders," she said, "so I want you to follow them as closely as possible. If you have doubts, ask me, and I'll be happy to answer them."

"I understand," Akira responded. "Don't worry. Even if you make a mistake, I'm sure your orders would still be better than anything I came up with. If I ask why you want me to do something, it'll be because I want to learn, not because I question your judgment." He spoke from the heart—he knew he was no tactical genius. And even Alpha acknowledged Elena's skill, so he had no reason to doubt her.

"I'll try not to let you down," she said, a tad embarrassed by his show of faith. Sara chuckled at her friend's reaction—then quickly turned her face to the dark halls to avoid an icy smile from Elena.

The underground passages hadn't been easy to navigate even when they were new. Now, with routes cut off by collapsed tunnels and closed shutters, they were practically labyrinthine. And the lack of light sources only compounded the problem. Yet Recon Team Nine moved unerringly through the dark maze—a testament to Elena's skill as a scout. She scanned the terrain and generated a floor plan of the underground, all the while using their movement distance and other data to chart their current location with pinpoint accuracy. She even plotted a safe course for them, avoiding probable monster dens and areas where an attack would put them at a

disadvantage.

They fought monsters several times, although Shikarabe dispatched most on his own. When the enemy was too numerous for that, all four hunters ganged up to eliminate the threat. Most of their encounters were with small groups of Yarata scorpions—hardly a challenge for this team.

The lion's share of the burden fell on Shikarabe, their point man. True to his word, he delivered results on par with Katsuya's whole team. So, naturally, he used more stamina, focus, and ammo than the rest. Elena decided it was time to give him a break.

"Sara, take over point from Shikarabe," she ordered.

"Sure thing," Sara responded.

"I'm not so tired I need a relief yet," Shikarabe interjected. "No need to rush."

"You've already used up plenty of energy and ammo," Elena said. "Trade places before you really wear yourself out. We don't want you running out ammo before the rest of us either."

"Yes, ma'am." Shikarabe saw her point. Then a thought struck him. "In that case, why not give Akira a shot?"

"Akira?" Elena looked a little doubtful.

Shikarabe nodded. "I want to see how well he can fight, in case we need to count on him later. I'm not questioning HQ's recommendation, but there's a world of difference between hearing about him and seeing it for ourselves. And if something gets the drop on him, we should still be able to bail him out. What do you say, Akira? If you're not willing, I won't force you."

"I don't mind," Akira replied. "What do you think, Elena?"

Elena took a good look at Akira. She wouldn't put him at the head of the group if she saw any sign that he was only reluctantly going along with a superior's suggestion. But to her eyes, he looked calm—neither afraid to take point nor eager to show off. He genuinely didn't care either way. And although he had lagged behind the rest of the team at first, he was now easily keeping pace with them. She supposed he had gotten over his nerves. In which case, she decided, Shikarabe's proposal had merit.

"All right," Elena said. "Akira, trade places with Shikarabe. And no matter what, don't push yourself too hard. Sara, Shikarabe, back him up if you ever think he's in danger—don't wait for my order. Is that clear?"

A chorus of agreement arose. Akira responded with his usual "Understood," while Sara gave a cheerful "Sure thing." And Shikarabe's "Yes, ma'am!" carried a hint of anticipation.

Tell me, Akira, Alpha said, *how much do you want me to help you with this?*

How much? Akira repeated, wondering why she asked. *As much as you can, thanks.*

Just a suggestion, but you could always underperform and hope they'll send you back to the security team next time. If you distinguish yourself today, however, they might assign you to somewhere even more dangerous tomorrow. So, what'll it be?

Akira finally grasped her meaning, but his answer didn't change: *That's not a bad idea, but Elena and Sara will have to cover for me if I slack off. So, gimme your full support anyway.*

I thought you'd say that. Okay, leave it to me!

Alpha smiled. Slowly but surely, she was beginning to unravel the mysteries of how Akira's mind worked.

Chapter 48: Surveying the Underground Labyrinth

The expedition continued without a hitch. Akira lived up to the standard Shikarabe had set as point man, matching the older hunter's pace and flawlessly dispatching any threats he encountered. Of course, he owed his performance to Alpha's support. She was already feeding him a monochrome visual of the pitch-dark tunnel, so apart from the lack of color, he could see his surroundings clear as day. She even simulated shadows on the rubble that littered the floors.

Akira, there are four Yarata scorpions down this passage. Kill them before they notice us, she said, highlighting the bugs in red for him.

On it. Akira raised his AAH assault rifle, lined up his bullets' predicted trajectory with one target's head, and calmly pulled the trigger. His muzzle flash momentarily revealed the passage in living color. A fraction of an instant later, gunfire echoed through the underground.

Alpha had guided his aim well, and his bullet struck its intended target dead on. The powerful overpressure ammo pierced the hard carapace of the scorpion's head and demolished its brain. Deprived of its neurological chain of command, the creature spasmed, then went still.

The remaining scorpions responded quickly, but it was already too late. Before they could put up any meaningful resistance, Akira took them out the same way.

Okay, got 'em. Akira exhaled and lowered his weapon. *Still, this thing packs a punch. I know I modded it, but I can't believe it's the same AAH.*

Unlike the bulky CWH, nothing about his customized assault rifle screamed "powerful"—it looked little different than it had before. Magazines of overpressure cartridges likewise looked almost identical to standard ammunition. But the difference in the damage that the modded and unmodded rifles inflicted was like night and day.

Weapons and ammo can synergize to give you a boost, but don't forget it

takes skill to make the most of them, Alpha responded, grinning smugly. The world's most devastating bullet was worthless unless it found its target. And even then, the outcome could shift drastically depending on whether it struck a vulnerability. How the shooter engaged their enemy also counted for a lot—the first combatant to spot their target could aim at their leisure.

I know, Akira said, smiling back. He realized he couldn't do this without Alpha's support, and he wanted to express his gratitude.

Sara hadn't been able to detect the scorpions Akira had just killed. Her task was to eliminate threats; she largely left it up to Elena to locate them. So her scouting abilities weren't quite up to seeing ahead in total blackness.

"Elena," she said, "would you send me your data?"

"Sure."

"Thanks," Sara responded as Elena's scanner data popped up in her view. Her partner's instruments were far more powerful than her own, and they had taken clear readings on the monsters. "I see them now. Looks like we had four Yarata scorpions, and Akira already wiped them out. I'm impressed."

"Did he need to kill them at that range?" Shikarabe wondered, monitoring the situation ahead through his own scanner. "I would've waited until we got a little closer to decide."

"The targets were right in our path, and they could have used some of the rubble in this passage as cover," Elena replied. "Taking them out before they had a chance to sneak up on us was a reasonable decision, although luring them in would be a valid strategy too. It comes down to personal preference."

"Well, I'll grant you that. Not everyone likes to fight at the same range. And it's not like he missed, so I guess I've got nothing to complain about," Shikarabe conceded. He still thought Akira had opened fire a little too soon, but only on targets they would probably have had to fight anyway. He dropped the subject—to Elena's secret relief.

Shikarabe didn't bother asking how Akira had spotted the scorpions. He just assumed the young hunter was using a top-of-the-line scanner. But Elena knew exactly what Akira's scanner could do—she'd sold it to him. And while it might have been good enough to detect scorpions at that range above ground and out in the open, it had almost no hope of doing so in these dark, obstructed tunnels. Could she have spotted the bugs with that

equipment? She didn't even have to think about it—the answer was no.

So, as far as Elena was concerned, what Akira had just done wasn't impressive: it was uncanny. And she thought she knew the explanation.

Being an Old Domain User might have something to do with it.

Akira hadn't even owned a scanner back when he'd rescued her and Sara. If that was anything to go by, being a User came with an exceptional aptitude for detecting threats.

If I'm wrong, I'd love to ask Akira how he knew those things were there...but I guess I can't risk it. Elena had promised Akira she wouldn't pry, and as much as advanced scanning tech interested her, she wouldn't break her word to her savior to satisfy her curiosity. More importantly, he might try to kill her if she asked whether his User abilities lay behind his exceptional insights. Her vague guesses—and his suspicions that she had them—would turn to certainties the moment she spoke them out loud. And even if that revelation didn't end in a firefight, it would certainly deal a fatal blow to her relationship with Akira—something she was anxious to avoid. So if Shikarabe thought Akira just had a good scanner, she decided, she ought to put a lid on her curiosity and go along with it.

Despite a fair number of run-ins with monsters, Recon Team Nine was making steady progress. Akira managed to dispatch most of the threats on his own. Thanks to Alpha's support, he'd avoided becoming a burden to his teammates. Her scouting allowed him to strike first and with deadly accuracy, even when winding tunnels and rubble-choked passages sometimes forced him into close-range combat.

All the while, the subterranean passages remained lightless as ever. Darkness shrouded the corpses of bygone prosperity that still slept in these ruins. Only in the fleeting moments that the hunters' lights shone on them did these time-eaten vestiges of a once great civilization reveal a semblance of their past selves.

During a cursory sweep of what had seemingly once been a store, Akira was shocked to discover heaps of preserved merchandise—relics of the Old World.

"Whoa! Look at all this stuff. It's a real find." He couldn't help wondering how much money he would make if he returned with this haul.

"I know how you feel, but leave them be," Sara cautioned him, grinning

with regret. “Our contracts give Kugamayama City rights to any relics we find on the job. So hands off, although I really, *really* understand the temptation.” The look on her face revealed just how badly she wished they *weren’t* on the job right now, but she resisted the lure of illicit relics. As much to warn herself as Akira, she continued, “Don’t fool yourself that you can get away with a little, or that they won’t notice a few relics mixed in with your spare ammo. It’s a bad idea. Don’t even think about it.”

“She’s right,” Elena added, amused that Sara now seemed to be speaking more to herself than to their companion. “They won’t search us all, but they usually catch hunters who try to sneak out with relics—you can’t help acting a little shifty when you’ve got something to hide. And if they find anything on you, they’ll confiscate the relics and slap you with a fine so high it’ll ruin your life three times over. So, don’t do anything you’ll regret.” She sounded a little like she was scolding a child, but Akira didn’t mind.

“I understand,” he responded obediently.

Elena gave him a satisfied smile.

“’Course, if you didn’t want the city hogging all these relics, all you had to do was make it down here on your own ahead of them,” Shikarabe chimed in, tackling the issue from a different perspective. “If that’s too hard for you, then forget it. Cocky guys who can’t keep themselves in line die young.” Then, as he surveyed the relics, something clicked in his memory, and he began muttering to himself. “Yeah, that’s an idea. I guess it *could* work.”

The rest of the team couldn’t help eyeing him with suspicion.

Their gazes reminded Shikarabe that mumbling over a heap of off-limits relics was just what someone planning to steal them might do. “I’m not getting any funny ideas, okay?” he began defensively. “This just reminded me of something. You remember that rumor from a little while back, about an untrained kid bringing valuable relics into one of the exchanges?”

A conflicted look passed over Akira’s face. Those rumors had gotten him followed and nearly killed.

“People started speculating about undiscovered ruins near the city, and a lot of hunters apparently went looking for them,” Shikarabe continued. “Of course, it all turned out to be a wild goose chase. You know the time I’m talking about?”

This time, the women's expressions soured. Chasing those rumors to Kuzusuhara had gotten them attacked and nearly killed by bandits.

"What's the matter?" Shikarabe asked, puzzled by his teammates' discomfort.

"Nothing," Elena replied, with feigned composure. "What about it?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that kid might've found his relics down here."

"Well, I suppose that's possible," Elena admitted. The explanation made a certain amount of sense. This underground shopping district stretched beneath the ruin's outskirts. And if the elusive find had been down here, it was no wonder all those hunters had failed to discover anything on the surface.

"Right? The kid could've run from monsters up above and happened to find his way underground through a hole or crack too small for an adult to squeeze through. It's a real possibility." While Shikarabe triumphantly expounded his theory, Akira—who knew the older hunter had it all wrong—did his best to appear unconcerned. "Hell, maybe Yarata scorpions made the hole, and it's usually covered by a bug masquerading as debris. Or maybe it collapsed and buried the kid when he tried to enlarge it. There're plenty of ways to account for the facts. And—"

"You'd better not be thinking we could sneak relics out if we found this other exit," Elena cut in. "I'll tell you now, I want no part of that." Since she was charting the tunnels, she probably could locate other exits by comparing her map to one of the ruins above.

Shikarabe chuckled. "I know, I know. I'm not dumb enough to pick a fight with the city; I just figured I might've solved a mystery. Cool your jets. What's got you guys so riled?"

"Don't mind us. We're just some of the hunters who got led on that 'wild goose chase.'"

"Sorry about that. You too, Akira?"

"More or less," Akira replied, though he had been doing the leading. Nevertheless, he'd been attacked by hunters in the ruins and washed-up ex-hunters in the city, forced to defend his finds before he was even properly armed—so the rumors had been as much of a nuisance to him as to Elena and Sara. But while he only remembered these incidents as minor inconveniences, the women were much less pleased to be reminded of their brush with death.

“I’m surprised you mind it that much,” Shikarabe said, puzzled by Elena’s scowl. “Did your search land you in real hot water or something?”

“Well, we definitely didn’t enjoy ourselves.” Sara laughed, partly to lift her partner’s spirits. “But in the end, we came out on top—we made a new friend, gained some experience, and got a much-needed reminder of how far we still have to go. So in hindsight, I’m glad we went. What about you, Elena?”

Seeing her best friend cheerful, Elena reflected that she had nothing to gain by dwelling on the past forever. “You’ve got a point,” she said, smiling from the heart. “Let’s just say it worked out for the best—that’s a healthier way of looking at things. So, I agree: I’m glad we went.”

“See? Plus, I feel like things have been going our way since then—like we got luckier, I guess.”

“True. Right after that is when things really started working out.”

Elena and Sara grinned at each other, reminded that the worst was already behind them. With Akira’s help, they’d overcome the nadir of their fortunes, and their lives had been steadily improving ever since.

Shikarabe wondered at the sudden rise in their spirits, but this didn’t feel like the right time to question it. Instead, he shifted his attention to his other teammate and asked, “How about you, Akira?”

It was an open-ended question, but Akira inferred what Shikarabe wanted to know from Elena and Sara’s conversation. “Well,” he said, “going by how things turned out, I’m glad it happened how it did.”

The rumors had landed Akira in all sorts of trouble: a pair of hunters had tried to kill him for his relic supply, and he’d annoyed Alpha by fighting a battle he hadn’t needed to when he’d rescued Elena and Sara. Ultimately, however, he’d sold his assailants’ gear to improve his own, and the women had saved him from a horde of monsters. He couldn’t have predicted those benefits at the time, but he still owed his life to them. So in hindsight, he could consider the whole incident a positive experience.

Shikarabe had brought up the rumors himself, but watching his teammates turn disgruntled and then cheerful over the course of the conversation both baffled and annoyed him. “Sounds like I’m the only one who actually worked his ass off for nothing,” he grumbled. “Druncam got involved, partly as training for our rookies. I got sent out there to keep an eye on the little idiots, and you wouldn’t believe the headache I had

cleaning up their messes while they ran wild." Recalling his hardships put him in an even worse mood. "I'm done talking about this; just thinking about it pisses me off. Akira, swap with me. I'll take point again and vent my anger on some monsters."

The team advanced deeper into the tunnels with Shikarabe back in the lead. Frequent scorpion encounters gave him plenty of opportunities to blow off steam.

Akira opened fire on a scorpion about five meters ahead, ending its life with a close-range burst of overpressure ammo. His next shots pierced another bug's armored exoskeleton, immobilizing and then killing it. The rest of the team was no less aggressive, eliminating the swarm before it had a chance to flee. The hunters had been up against thirty or so bugs of various sizes, but none of the humans had suffered so much as a scratch. Yet despite the easy victory, the group looked far from sanguine.

"The swarms keep getting bigger," Shikarabe grumbled, kicking a nearby scorpion corpse. "And there never seem to be any fewer of 'em no matter how many we kill. Think there's a big nest near here?"

Elena considered. If Shikarabe was right, then this was a job for the extermination team. They had already come too far from the last checkpoint to contact headquarters. So, if they really had a major nest on their hands, they ought to turn back and report it.

"Let's withdraw for now," Elena decided. "We've collected a good bit of data on this place, and we're getting close to our minimum expedition time, anyway."

And so, the group turned back toward Checkpoint Nineteen, relying on the map Elena had made to find their way. Their return trip was relatively free of monsters and seemed to be going smoothly—at least to Akira.

Suddenly, however, Elena halted. "That's strange," she muttered, looking perplexed.

"Is something wrong?" Akira asked, with a slight frown. Something about Elena's tone unsettled him.

"The passage is blocked with rubble, like the ceiling caved in." Elena had been scanning their surroundings as they went. And since they were returning over ground they'd already covered once, she had abandoned detailed readings in favor of a survey of the terrain for a considerable

distance around them. This new, low-resolution scan showed a major blockage in the tunnel that should lead them back to Checkpoint Nineteen. Elena guessed it was earth or rubble, although she couldn't be sure.

"Maybe another recon team used explosives fighting in an area with structural problems," Shikarabe speculated. "This ruin's supposed to be pretty sturdy, but scorpions have dug holes in some of the walls, so parts of it might be ready to collapse."

"Elena, is there a way around the blockage?" Sara asked nervously.

"Several," Elena replied. "You don't have to worry about that."

The rest of the team felt reassured—wandering the underground passages in search of an exit hadn't struck any of them as an appealing prospect.

But Elena still looked concerned, and soon, the others learned why. "It's just, we've made three detours already."

That revelation put grave looks back on the other hunters' faces. Three blocked passages were too many to chalk up to coincidence. But they realized the danger panicking would put them in.

Shikarabe exhaled and tried to keep calm. "Maybe a major battle on the surface took out all the weak tunnels at once," he suggested. "I'm glad we turned back when we did—getting buried alive's not on my to-do list. Let's find a new way around the block while we've still got stamina and ammo to spare."

"Good point," Elena said levelly. "We should pick up the pace. This next detour will be a bit of a long way around, but don't let it get to you." She turned around to lead her team back toward their new route.

Akira was about to follow when Alpha stopped him, looking serious. *Akira*, she said, *stop the others and urge them to take the shortest route.*

Isn't that what we're already doing? he asked, nonplussed. He could tell from her tone that they were in trouble, but he didn't understand what she wanted him to do. As far as he knew, Elena was already leading them on the shortest route around the blocked tunnels. Once he stopped the group, what other way did she want him to propose?

That's not what I mean, Alpha responded, picking up on Akira's confusion. Her ensuing explanation was founded on some conjecture. But if she was right, they had to act fast before their situation took a sharp turn for the worse.

Akira grimaced. Although he understood Alpha's theory and believed it, he didn't know how to communicate it to the rest of the team. Even so, he had to try.

"Elena!" he called. "Do you have a minute?"

"Yes, Akira?" Elena noted the boy's grave expression and immediately grew even warier of their surroundings. Her own instruments showed no threats, yet she couldn't discount the possibility that his enigmatic scouting expertise had picked up something she'd missed.

"I'd like to investigate the new rubble blocking the shortest route between here and Checkpoint Nineteen as quickly as possible. Do you mind?" Akira couldn't think of a good explanation that didn't involve Alpha, and delay would only make their situation worse. So, after a brief deliberation, he'd opted to give no justification at all. Instead, he looked at Elena with all the urgency he could muster.

Elena stared steadily back at him, as if trying to spot the true reason for his request. His gaze wavered, she perceived, but only because he felt unsure he could convince her of something he believed himself.

"All right," she decided. "Let's go. You make this sound urgent, so I'm guessing we don't have time to waste on explanations."

"Right," Akira replied.

"This way." Elena broke into a run. Akira and Sara quickly joined her, and Shikarabe followed suit a moment later.

She led them through the tunnels at a rapid pace. More haste meant less careful scouting and greater risk of ambushes. At worst, it could get them killed. Elena knew that, but she still rushed ahead.

Shikarabe had his doubts about Akira's proposal, and he'd been shocked when Elena adopted it without question. "Hey!" he shouted angrily while guarding their rear. "At least tell me why we're doing this!"

"Later," Elena responded, quashing his reasonable demand. "I'm in charge, remember? If you've got a problem with that, feel free to wait here."

Shikarabe clicked his tongue and snapped, "You'd better have a good excuse when this is over!" Then he ran on in silence.

Their reckless speed paid off, and they soon arrived at their destination. Elena had judged the passage to be blocked with rubble when she'd scanned the area. Now they could see it with their naked eyes, and sure

enough, it was impassable.

Akira, who had taken point partway through their run, stopped near the wall of the corridor. The rest of the team followed his lead.

Akira, switch to your CWH, Alpha instructed. *And like yesterday, be grateful that your client is covering your ammo costs.*

Meaning your hunch was on the money? Akira asked, looking grim.

Bingo.

Akira raised his CWH and took aim at the blockage in the tunnel.

"Akira, what's your plan?" Elena asked, surprised.

"That's not rubble!" Akira shouted as he pulled the trigger. His shot exploded through the heap of camouflaged scorpions in a shower of gore and shattered exoskeleton.

Chapter 49: A Hunter's Skill

Elena had erred—it wasn't rubble blocking their path, but a wall of camouflaged scorpions. Had she been conducting a more focused survey with her scanners, she would have noticed the trap; but as it was, she'd sacrificed accuracy to scan a wider area on their return trip, only looking for active threats. Now that trade-off had come back to haunt her.

Its cover blown, the swarm immediately surged toward the hunters. But their massive wave broke against a wall of bullets, as Sara and Shikarabe wasted no time putting their weapons to work. Their strafing fire disintegrated the bugs in the lead, blasting their exoskeletons into shrapnel that forced the ranks behind them to recoil. Without a vanguard to hide behind, the next wave suffered the same fate. In the blink of an eye, the cycle of destruction burned through to the tail end of the swarm. Deprived of their camouflage, the bugs stood helpless before the hunters' onslaught. Soon the scorpions that had once filled the tunnel were no more, their advantage in numbers wiped out in the face of an even greater swarm of bullets.

Akira stood awestruck at the devastation wrought by his teammates. Calmly exhaling, they had already recovered from their shock at the scorpion blockade.

The boy snapped out of his daze. "Elena, let's hurry back to Checkpoint Nineteen. I'd like to get close enough to contact them, at least. In the worst case, the scorpions could already have us surrounded, and I'd rather break through before they draw their net any tighter."

"All right," Elena agreed. "Sara, Shikarabe: take point. Expect a swarm anywhere the terrain has changed significantly from our first pass, and go in ready to blast through it. We'll let you set the pace, but try to keep it brisk. Akira, I want you to guard our rear. Get moving."

"Watch our backs, Akira," Sara called with a friendly grin as she moved ahead.

"Well, it beats wandering around looking for an exit," Shikarabe

grumbled and broke into a run.

Elena finished tuning her scanner and smiled at Akira. “All right, let’s get going.”

“Right.” Akira gave an emphatic nod.

With a satisfied chuckle, Elena started running. Akira followed close behind.

As they made their way back through the tunnels, the hunters ran into so many scorpions that Akira couldn’t imagine where the bugs had been hiding. But despite frequent clashes, the recon team never came close to being overwhelmed. Their front line plowed through the swarms—Elena knew how Sara and Shikarabe tended to fight, and she planned their route accordingly.

Sara demolished scorpions with overwhelming firepower. She wielded her small, handheld minigun with ease, blanketing the swarms with devastating projectiles that chewed through her targets in rapid succession. Her strength, enhanced with nanomachines, easily suppressed the heavy weapon’s powerful recoil. And so, countless hard-shelled arachnids disintegrated before they even got close to her.

But she still couldn’t get all of them. Some scorpions scuttled up to her along the ceiling and launched themselves at her from directly overhead. Even so, Sara was never caught unawares. Linked to Elena’s scanner, she didn’t simply dodge the falling bugs—she kicked high and shattered their exoskeletons. They died instantly, then rebounded off the ceiling before sailing into a storm of bullets that ripped them apart.

Shikarabe picked off any scorpions Sara missed. Even after he killed them, their many corpses appeared uninjured at first glance—testaments to his precise aim. He also prevented enemies from bursting out of side passages, sealing any openings by kicking chunks of rubble into them. The debris, which could barely fit in the side passages, crushed any advancing swarms in its way as it hurtled to the ends of the tunnels. When he found no convenient rubble in reach, he used one of the larger scorpion corpses. Every opening he blocked was one less potential threat.

Elena monitored the situation via her scanner and issued detailed orders. Under her leadership, the team kept moving at a rapid pace.

Their combat prowess left Akira floored. The day before, he had been hard-pressed just to hold a scorpion swarm at bay, even from an advantageous position at one end of a long tunnel. Now his teammates forged a path through the vast halls, scattering bugs before them. True, they had a numerical advantage, but he doubted three of himself could have matched their performance.

Amazing, he thought. *No wonder they could scout down here with such a small team.*

Stop gawking. You've got your own job to do, Alpha replied, pointing behind him.

Without slackening his pace, he looked over his shoulder and grimaced. A fresh swarm was closing in from the rear, both scorpions who had forced their way through Shikarabe's makeshift blockades and others from deeper within the underground ruins.

Where do they keep coming from?!

Akira quickly pivoted and stopped in his tracks. Then he braced his CWH and began firing proprietary cartridges into the growing horde. The devastating ammo cut swathes through the swarm, though a steady stream of fresh scorpions soon filled the gaps. Those brief delays allowed Akira to sprint after the other hunters before he turned to fire again. He had been repeating this process for some time.

This is reminding me a lot of yesterday! he groused.

Then you should already know how to handle it, Alpha responded. *And unlike yesterday, you have the luxury of retreat—although you also have a wider space to fight in.*

So is this easier or harder?! Make up your mind!

Which do you think?

How the hell should I know?!

It's about the same, which means you have nothing to worry about—you can beat them just like you did yesterday.

That's a relief! Akira grinned, albeit a tad desperately, as he fought on.

◆

Uneasy about what was happening behind them, Shikarabe glanced back at Akira. What he saw surprised him.

He's smiling. *I'm impressed he's got it in him. Guess I won't have to watch my back from now on.*

There was nothing confident about Akira's grin. But the older hunter could be forgiven for his mistake: Akira's combat performance, enhanced with Alpha's support, left heaps of dead scorpions. It all added up to an amazing impression, at least on the surface.

But then a puzzled look crossed Shikarabe's own face. *He really is good. I can see why HQ vouched for him. And yet...*

Shikarabe's instincts still told him Akira was nothing special. Yet the boy's kill count clearly said otherwise, and the man found that difficult to argue with. Shikarabe had long relied on his intuition; now he feared it was not what it had been. He scowled faintly.

I always thought I kept personal feelings out of my judgments, but maybe working with those brats has me looking down on Akira without realizing it. He is *about the same age. And if that's true, I'd better be careful.*

With that, Shikarabe turned his full attention back to the task at hand.

◆

Thanks to their joint efforts and heavy firepower, the hunters at last managed to blast their way out of the scorpions' net. No more reinforcements joined the swarm, and after they mowed down the remnants, not a living bug remained anywhere nearby. Elena confirmed this, and the team could at last breathe easier.

They were already within communication range of the checkpoint, so Elena put in a call. "This is Recon Team Nine. Come in, Checkpoint Nineteen."

"This is Checkpoint Nineteen," a voice responded. "You on your way back?"

"We are, and we just got out of a fight with an army of Yarata scorpions. Given the size of the swarm, there must be a major nest in the area. We're about to return to the checkpoint, so watch out in case we lead any of them your way. We'll get you the details once we've made it back. Over."

"Roger that. Out."

Elena ended the call and sighed. Now that she knew they had working

communications again, they could count on support from the checkpoint in an emergency. They had reached the safe zone.

"We're out of the woods," she announced, smiling at her team. "Let's take it easy from here."

The rest of the trip back to Checkpoint Nineteen was an easy walk. Akira, Sara, and Shikarabe went on break as soon as they arrived. Elena explained their findings to the officials in detail while she transmitted her data to headquarters. She, Sara, and Shikarabe had already served their minimum shifts, so Recon Team Nine would disband as soon as she finished. Until then, all its members were officially on standby.

◆

With nothing else to occupy his time, Shikarabe asked Akira why he'd suggested they change their route. Akira cited his experience fighting scorpions above ground: the bugs had surrounded him before he knew it, and he'd mistaken their camouflaged shapes for rubble. As he told it, he'd suspected the new walls in their path might be disguised scorpions as well and worried that, if he was right, their team might already be surrounded. This was the best explanation he could offer without revealing Alpha's existence, but it didn't completely satisfy Shikarabe.

"Sounds a little like a post hoc justification to me," the man said. "Still, it hangs together, and it turns out you did make the right call. But how could you be sure? What if you'd been wrong?"

Akira, of course, had felt certain of his conclusions, but only thanks to Alpha's support. And since he couldn't tell the truth, he improvised. "If I'd been wrong, I would've had one less thing to worry about. That's all."

"But we would definitely have thought less of you."

"I'll bet. Sorry, but if that happens, call up HQ and tell 'em not to send me back."

That startled Shikarabe. Akira seemed totally indifferent to his own reputation. Most people couldn't stand having their talents go unacknowledged. Shikarabe could tolerate that, up to a point. He knew disrespect could affect a hunter's share of pay and sometimes even endanger their life. But Druncam's rookies overestimated themselves—a reaction to, and side effect of, syndicate policies that favored them. The

young hunters felt that the veterans undervalued their skills, and many took any criticism personally. So as far as Shikarabe was concerned, Akira's response was a breath of fresh air.

But Shikarabe still had his doubts. It was one thing to accept the consequences of being wrong—quite another to be convinced you were right. And Akira had seemed absolutely certain that he was correct. "Was that really your only reason?" Shikarabe pressed. "You didn't look like you just wanted to check a hunch to me."

"Not sure what to tell you. I guess I just followed my instinct," Akira replied. What else was he supposed to say? He couldn't admit that Alpha had told him everything.

But this evasive answer went down surprisingly well with Shikarabe. "Instinct, huh? Guess I can't argue with that." The older hunter usually listened to his own intuition, so he found it difficult to question Akira's. Most proficient hunters had good instincts, and the boy had shown himself strong enough to fit right into that category. So the man took him at his word, at least for the time being. "Well, you were right, so I guess it doesn't matter. Elena, my apologies, but do you mind if I leave early? I've got to write up a report for Druncam."

"That's fine by me," Elena responded. "See you."

"Thanks. Bye."

With that, Shikarabe left them.

As Shikarabe made his way toward the checkpoint's exit, Shiori appeared.

"Mr. Shikarabe, may I have a moment?" she asked. "I'd like to inquire about something."

Shikarabe looked around and spotted the young Druncam hunters watching them from a short distance. Shiori had at least been considerate enough to not bring Katsuya with her.

"Make it short," he answered gruffly. "I'm busier than I look—got reports to write back at the base."

"Then I'll be brief. What is your opinion of Mr. Akira?"

"Why? You want me to say I should've brought Katsuya's team instead? With all due respect, I'd never say that no matter how bad Akira screwed up."

“I, at least, have no such intention,” Shiori said stiffly. “I simply wish to form an accurate opinion of Mr. Akira’s ability.”

“What for? That doesn’t seem like any of your business to me.”

“Just in case.”

“If that’s all, I’ve got no reason to answer.” Shikarabe was turning to head off when Shiori’s next words stopped him in his tracks.

“I’m ashamed to say that I embarrassed myself by having a falling-out with Mr. Akira yesterday,” she said, gravely regarding the startled man. “Fortunately, we managed to avoid violence, but we came dangerously close. I would like to acquire a better grasp of his ability to avoid repeating my mistake.”

“Just don’t do anything stupid, and you shouldn’t have to worry,” Shikarabe countered.

“I misjudged what Mr. Akira was capable of.”

Shikarabe looked taken aback. Clearly, Shiori had failed to properly size up the young hunter, and that had led her into some kind of blunder—but why would she care enough to consult *him* about it? Nevertheless, in deference to her earnestness, he replied, “So, you wanna know how skilled Akira is? After seeing him fight out there, I wouldn’t say he was on the same level as Elena, Sara, or me—but he *was* good enough to not slow us down. That answer your question?”

“I know that a variety of factors led you to choose Mr. Akira for this expedition in place of Mr. Katsuya and his team. If you could ignore all those circumstances and choose purely based on skill, would you still make the same decision?”

Shikarabe’s expression hardened. “My instincts tell me Katsuya is stronger. I respect his skill if nothing else. But I won’t commit myself to more than that.”

“Thank you very much.” Shiori bowed deeply.

Shikarabe felt slightly relieved. “I don’t know what happened, but you’ve got it rough too, it sounds like.”

“It’s my professional duty,” Shiori responded, with her usual smile.

“Your job, huh? I don’t know how much you get paid, but I’ll bet it doesn’t cover looking out for the rest of those kids too.”

“You needn’t worry. I serve Miss Reina—all else is incidental.”

Shikarabe considered for a moment, then murmured, “You don’t say.”

As he turned to leave, he caught a glimpse of Katsuya, and a brief scowl crossed his face. His gut still told him that his former trainee was stronger than Akira. When he asked himself whether Katsuya could have done all Akira had on their expedition, however, that same intuition answered no. These contradictory responses, coming from instincts he'd long trusted with his life, made Shikarabe want to pull his hair out.

◆

"Shiori, umm... What did you say to him?" Reina asked hesitantly when her companion rejoined the Druncam group.

"I inquired about Mr. Akira's performance on the reconnaissance team, miss," Shiori replied. "It seems that he caused no difficulties for Mr. Shikarabe and his companions, and that they completed the expedition without incident."

"Oh, really? Well, I guess that's not too surprising, since the three of them were able to handle everything on their own before anyway."

Reina was rather naive—merely being able to keep up with Shikarabe marked Akira as a cut above the average hunter. Shiori perceived this, but she felt it was neither the time or the place to set Reina straight.

"I see," Katsuya said, his conflicted feelings plain on his face. "Did Shikarabe say anything else, Shiori?" The boy left his deeper questions unspoken: Had Akira once again proven himself to those who looked down on him? Was Shikarabe one more person surprised at his skill and forced to revise his first impressions?

Shiori recalled Shikarabe's verdict. "He said, 'My instincts tell me Katsuya is stronger. I respect his skill if nothing else,'" she recited, observing Katsuya's reaction. "I share his opinion."

"I...I see. Thank you." Katsuya looked startled, then broke into a slightly bashful smile.

"Stronger than Akira, huh? I knew you were good, Katsuya." Reina bobbed her head, impressed. Airi gave a satisfied nod as well, and Yumina grinned.

Shiori took a step back and surveyed the young hunters. Once again, she compared Akira and Katsuya; once again, her experience and intuition told her that Katsuya was stronger. Yet she also guessed why Shikarabe had

avoided telling her outright which boy he would choose to take with him: he knew he'd misjudged Akira's ability, just as she had. And he feared that giving a definitive answer would mean contradicting his instincts, making it harder for him to trust them in dire straits.

Shiori took another look at Akira. Even now, the boy didn't strike her as formidable.

◆

After Shikarabe's departure, Akira went on chatting with Elena and Sara, who were surprised to hear his opinion of their expedition.

"Did you really think it was that tough?" Sara asked. "You handled yourself so well you made it look easy. At the very least, you more than earned your pay. Don't feel like you have to act humble on our account."

"I'm not." Akira shook his head gravely. "That was nearly too much for me. I don't think I have what it takes to work recon yet."

"Really? What do you think, Elena?"

"Well, Shikarabe had no complaints, and I thought Akira was an asset to the team," Elena replied. "But that doesn't change how he feels. Still, you did well today, so I suspect they'll assign you to recon or extermination again tomorrow."

"Y-You think so?" Akira asked.

Elena saw a number of emotions cross his face: low self-esteem, anxiety, and gratitude for their recognition of his skill. She wasn't surprised at his variety of feelings. But which one was strongest, deep down? She put on a teasing smile and said, "If you like, I can always report that you didn't pull your weight on Recon Team Nine. I bet that would get you reassigned to security."

Elena watched eagerly for Akira's response. If he was merely being humble, she expected the offer to unnerve him. She hoped to teach him to have a little more confidence, since excessive modesty could work against him in negotiations.

But Akira defied her expectations. "Yes, please!" he responded earnestly.

Elena exchanged a startled look with Sara. Then, bemused, she asked, "Umm... Akira, if you like working security so much, why did you join the

recon team? You should have had some input on where you got assigned."

"I did ask for the security team, but the official up on the ground floor told me to pick recon or extermination. It sounded like someone was weirdly impressed with how I fought yesterday, even though all I did was get trigger happy 'cause my client was paying for my ammo. I'd have been in the red for sure otherwise."

"Ah, of course. You did mention you had that in your contract. You're right that you couldn't normally turn a profit using CWH proprietary cartridges on Yarata scorpions."

Akira nodded. Then, diffidently, he said, "So, would you mind making that report for me?"

The women exchanged another look. This time, Sara replied. "Are you really sure about this, Akira? Recon and extermination definitely pay better than security. The difference might not be as big when you factor in ammo costs, but it would still boost your hunter rank and look better on your résumé."

"I don't mind," Akira said. "Great pay only matters if I'm alive to spend it. This job's too much for me."

Elena and Sara could tell he meant every word, but they couldn't see why. Given the way he'd fought, this seemed less like caution and more like full-blown cowardice. Even so, Elena told herself, she ought to respect his wishes.

"All right," she said, with a reassuring smile. "I can't outright lie in my report, but I can say that you felt pushed to your limits, complained that you weren't skilled enough to scout this area, and really didn't want to be on the recon or extermination teams. Do you still want me to go ahead with this?"

"Yes, please. It won't bother me," Akira replied without hesitation.

Sara grinned at him. "You sure are an oddball. Most people want *better* evaluations than they deserve."

"Do they? Most people must be in a rush to die." Akira seemed puzzled, then cracked a wry grin. "Then again, I'm still a hunter, so maybe I'm not much different."

Elena and Sara broke into smiles too.

◆

After Elena and Sara finished their shifts and left, Akira was reassigned to guard the checkpoint. He stood watch on its outskirts, peering into the subterranean darkness for any sign of an attack. Strictly speaking, Alpha was doing all the watching—Akira was just standing there, looking the part of a silent and dedicated guard. And since Alpha would tell him if he had anything to worry about, he performed his duties flawlessly.

Man, I knew Sara was strong, but wow. Was that how a top-notch hunter fights? he asked. Watching his teammates tear through the scorpions' trap, he felt like he'd gotten a glimpse at what the best in their profession could do.

Alpha disagreed. *I hate to burst your bubble, but none of them have the skills or the gear to call themselves first-rate. They're only strong for hunters operating out of Kugamayama.*

That's all?! Akira was shocked. If what he'd seen didn't qualify as first-rate, he couldn't imagine what did.

Most of the best hunters operate on the far eastern border, near the Front Line. Their gear, their skill, and the monsters they fight would all blow your mind. Only hunters who can hack it in that war zone get to call themselves top-notch.

Akira recalled what Katsuragi had told him about the Front Line: hunters there saw tanks the way he saw guns—they wouldn't stand a chance otherwise. The boy was beginning to realize just how vast a world he lived in.

Guess there's always someone better, he mused. *Hang on. If it's that dangerous, how'd Katsuragi and Darius make it there and back?*

The Front Line is a big place, Alpha replied. *They probably stuck to the safest areas and brought plenty of bodyguards.*

Oh, that explains it.

It still was a gamble. They're lucky they didn't die, although you'd have to ask them whether they won their bet. Just making it back alive wouldn't be a real victory—they'd need to turn a profit worth the risk too.

Sounds like hunting. When you look at it like that, first-rate hunters must be unbelievable. Akira couldn't imagine how powerful a hunter would need to be to keep winning on the Front Line.

Your goal is to become one of them. Learning to wipe out one of these scorpion swarms on your own would be a good start.

Akira couldn't help looking skeptical. *You want me to fight that many monsters alone?*

Naturally. And without my *help too, in case you were wondering.*

Akira's shock gave way to doubt. *Do you seriously think I'll ever be able to pull that off?*

Of course I do. Alpha beamed. *Did you forget who's training you? That said, even I can't promise you'll be up to that in another month or so.*

Akira remained silent, stunned. Then he grinned. *Okay, got it. If that's how you want it, don't skimp on that training.*

You can count on me, Alpha responded, with her usual self-assured smile.

◆

When Alpha had told Akira she would make him skillful enough to wipe out a swarm of Yarata scorpions on his own, he'd naturally been skeptical. But she'd insisted it was possible, and in his mind, that counted for a lot. Akira had already come to trust Alpha's judgment more than his own—that is, he figured that whatever she said was probably true. Only "probably," but it was still a measure of trust.

Most people couldn't do what they'd decided was impossible. They expected failure, so they failed, and thus expected to fail even more. The cycle never broke.

But Alpha had just removed Akira's mental roadblock, transforming his understanding of his own potential. Neither of them wholly understood how significant that was. Great things are achieved by those who believe them possible—who are so convinced of their inevitable success that faith is unnecessary.

Akira's perceptions had been rewritten. In his mind, success was simply a matter of course.

Side Story: The Children Who Would Be Hunters

They were called orphanages, these institutions in the East, as the region under the sway of the ELGC was known. Yet not all orphanages were created equal. Within the shelter of a city's walls or other wealthy areas, they served primarily as a form of social insurance. Why cast a child out into the lower districts just because their guardians had died and they no longer had the means to live? That would be wasteful, reasoned the municipal and corporate authorities. It would be a major loss to the city's economy if, after receiving the costly academic and social education proper to the walled districts, the child were simply written off. So these institutions provided livelihoods and education for the unfortunate. And the children they cultivated grew into powerful supporters of the ELGC.

In less well-to-do parts of the East, an orphanage was a form of supplementary life insurance—a guarantee that after the policyholder was gone, their children would be cared for. Such insurance was in high demand among shipping workers, private security firms, and all those with deadly jobs that brought them into contact with the wasteland. Because many employers helped cover the premiums, it was also relatively easy to obtain.

Even hunters could get approved if their rank was high enough—another perk for the profession's elite. This also discouraged highly successful hunters from rushing to save for their children's futures—and taking their fortunes out of circulation for extended periods in the process. The Eastern economy would suffer if those who earned did not also spend.

With the aid of such systems, orphaned children with sufficiently wealthy parents were spared a trip to the slums. Of course, the care they received depended on what their parents had paid—the lower the premiums, the sooner they would be driven from their new homes.

At one such orphanage in Nanogamiya City, a boy and a girl who were approaching the end of their stay faced each other in the courtyard.

“Hey, are you serious about becoming a hunter?” the girl asked gravely.

“Yeah. I can’t stay here much longer, anyway,” the boy replied. Her seriousness seemed to intimidate him, but his firm tone left no hope that he would change his mind. “I’ve been getting gentle nudges—questions about what I plan to do with my life—and it seemed like a good opportunity.”

Residents of the orphanage often heard about work in the wasteland, since most of their parents had been involved with it in some way. Some still were—living parents used the facility as a nursery or boarding house for their children during shipping runs and other long absences. Former residents turned hunters also dropped in occasionally, supplying yet more wasteland tales. A fair number of the children raised on such stories set out to become hunters themselves.

And this boy, Katsuya by name, was one of them.

The girl was still fixing Katsuya with her stern glare, so he tried to distract her. “What about you, Yumina? Have you already settled on a job, or are you gonna stay here a while longer?”

Yumina didn’t answer. Instead, she gave Katsuya a bitter pill: “If you become a hunter just to chase your dreams, you’re going to die.”

It was true that orphans-turned-hunters dropped by to tell glowing tales of their exploits, but their visits often stopped without warning. Had they merely cut ties with the orphanage, or were they dead? The children avoided the subject, hoping it was the former. Those whose parents failed to return from long transport trips would cry that they had been abandoned, often weeping the more because they didn’t want to believe their parents were dead. Death was no rarity.

Yumina tried to tell herself that Katsuya didn’t realize just how common it was—otherwise, she had no hope of stopping him. “You’d better not be thinking that you can hack it on your own. And no one will agree to team up with a rookie fresh out of the orphanage.”

In response, Katsuya handed Yumina a pamphlet. It announced that Druncam, a hunter syndicate in Kugamayama City, was recruiting young members. “I’m not *that* full of myself. This says they train new recruits and keep them working in teams. There’s some kind of entrance exam, but it can’t be too hard if they’re advertising here.”

Yumina’s expression turned even more somber as she scrutinized the pamphlet. “All right,” she said and walked off, still clutching it.

Her abrupt departure left Katsuya confused. Still, there were more pamphlets left on the rack, so he didn't dwell on it.

◆

On the day the Druncam transport was coming, Katsuya joined the other hopefuls waiting in a plaza near where the city met the wasteland. The candidates ranged from other children to young adults, and while he wasn't the only one fresh from an orphanage, a few looked as if they might already have some work experience.

Katsuya carried only a small backpack stuffed with things he expected to need at the testing site. The syndicate had given the would-be recruits permission to come unarmed and in ordinary clothes, since it would provide protection and transportation. Those who wished to bring their own gear were free to do so—although, in the interest of fairness, they would use weapons the syndicate lent them during the exam.

At the scheduled time, a large, armored troop transport, built to handle desert terrain, pulled up in front of the group. The truck bore Druncam insignia. A man from the syndicate climbed out.

"If you want to join, get on," he announced. "We'll drive you to the testing site. But let me be clear: we're going into the wasteland, and we *don't* guarantee you'll survive. If you pass, you'll be working there from now on—that's what hunters do. I'll wait five minutes. Think it over."

The transport's rear hatch opened, but the candidates made no move to board. They only shuffled nervously.

"Hang on," one said. "Aren't you gonna protect us?"

"Of course," the man replied. "But that doesn't mean you'll be safe, just safer than you'd be without us. When you die, you die. And the moment you set foot on this truck, you'll become provisional members of Druncam. So don't assume we'll act like your hired bodyguards." He laughed and surveyed the group. "Any other questions? Ask as many as you like—we'll just leave you behind if time runs out before you finish."

"Just tell me one thing about the test," another candidate asked gravely. "Will we die if we fail?"

"No, no, but you'll fail if you die."

At that flippant response, the hopefuls stiffened, realizing now that the

test could prove fatal.

But the man smiled serenely. “Is that it? Don’t be shy. I doubt anyone needs me to tell ’em hunters can die on the job, but better safe than sorry.” He paused, waiting for more questions. “We good here? All right, then, use the time you’ve got left to think carefully.” With that, he climbed back aboard the truck.

The candidates just looked at each other, getting cold feet. The loss of their parents meant that death might have played a bigger role in their lives than in the average person’s, but the deaths themselves had still been off in the wasteland, far removed from their everyday experience. The realization that they were about to set foot in that place of death halted them in their tracks.

Then Katsuya took a deep breath, steadying his nerves and dispelling his cowardice, and stepped resolutely forward. A few followed him: some looked determined—others, afraid.

The rear hatch closed, leaving roughly half the group outside.

When Katsuya boarded the transport, he found its benches already occupied by candidates from elsewhere. Unsure what else to do, he sat down in an open space. Although the benches were far from crowded, someone else soon took the seat beside him. He casually glanced at his new neighbor and immediately froze.

“Yumina?! What are you doing here?”

“Taking the test,” Yumina replied. “What else would I be doing?”

She had stealthily followed Katsuya to the plaza. As soon as she’d seen him board the transport, she had followed with a solemn look on her face—though now her expression was normal once more.

“Are you crazy?!” Katsuya shouted. “Get off while you still can!”

“Keep it down. You’ll bother the others,” Yumina chided him, her level tone in stark contrast to his panic.

By the time Katsuya pulled himself together, the hatch had closed. He couldn’t make a scene—both the man from Druncam and the other candidates were already glaring at him for his first outburst. Instead, he whispered, “Do you realize what you’re getting yourself into, Yumina? Remember what he said outside? You might die.”

“Right back at you,” Yumina replied, giving Katsuya her sternest glare

yet. Faced with that, and with the truck already moving, he gave up on any further attempts to dissuade her.

◆

The Yaharata Factory Ruins stood in a basin far to the west of Kugamayama. The site was recent by Old World standards, and the relics it yielded were of little technological value. And since it wasn't home to many monsters either, it had long since been picked clean. At this point, hunters considered Yaharata just another clump of derelict buildings—barely a ruin at all.

The armored transport carrying Katsuya, Yumina, and the other hopefuls parked on the factory grounds.

"We've reached the testing site," the man from Druncam explained. "I'm about to hand out the gear you'll use in your exam. Make sure you don't lose it."

Each candidate received a low-cost version of an AAH assault rifle and a basic data terminal, both customized for testing purposes, along with spare magazines and a belt to hold them.

"Those terminals are loaded with a map of the ruin where you'll be taking your exam. Study it and travel to the point we've marked for you. If you run into any monsters, deal with them individually using the weapons I just gave you."

Some of the candidates were more used to handling firearms than others, but none of them had been to a monster-infested ruin before. They looked at their rifles with growing anxiety, imagining the battles to come.

"I'll send you out one at a time. Get going as soon as you receive a notification on your terminal. That about covers it. Any questions?"

While the other hopefuls looked at the weapons in their hands and the magazines on their belts, too unnerved by the idea of real combat to speak, Yumina raised her hand immediately. "Why one at a time? I've heard that Druncam hunters operate in teams, so I'd prefer to set out in a group if possible."

"Sorry, but no can do," the man answered. "This exam is to test your individual skills."

"Is that so? I guess that makes sense."

She and Katsuya frowned. They had each planned on protecting the other.

"Don't think about meeting up in the ruins either," the man added. "That's why we stagger your start times. And you're all assigned different checkpoints, so you won't be able to find each other even if you stop and wait on the way."

Their concerned looks deepened—the man had read their minds.

"Anything else?"

"The gear you gave us will be enough to beat any monsters we meet, won't it?" another boy asked nervously. "We won't run into anything we can't handle?"

"Probably."

"P-Probably?!" the boy shouted in spite of himself, and some of the other kids began muttering. "What do you mean, probably?! I know this is a test, but you can't expect us to go out there underequipped!"

The syndicate man didn't seem bothered by their reproachful looks, even as more and more of the candidates grew upset. With a brief glare, he cowed the boy into silence. Then he spoke, a note of warning entering his voice. "If you lose your shit like that when you run into a monster, you'll start blasting away randomly. You'll miss every shot—and then it'll close in for the kill. You might win your first fight, but what about the rest of them? I gave you plenty of ammo, but panic and you'll still run out, wasting it on dead bodies." Calmly, the man concluded, "So, will you die? The way you're acting, absolutely. You're a dead man walking."

The boy didn't respond, so the man added, "We know you're amateurs. But you'll be hunting alongside us in the wasteland, so we need to know you can handle yourself in a crisis. We can't have you losing your head and firing wildly when you're walking behind us. So we test you to weed out guys like that." His tone grew more emphatic as he added, "The area outside this truck is safe by wasteland standards, but it'll still kill anyone who can't keep their head. If you become a hunter, you'll spend your whole career fighting in places like that. So we won't take anyone who's not prepared, and being green is no excuse."

Only silence met him now.

"If you don't think you can handle it, back out," the man said, wrapping up his speech. "Just keep sitting where you are when your terminal tells you

to start. I know I've said this before, but think it over carefully." With that, he opened the rear hatch and left.

A heavy atmosphere filled the transport. No one spoke aloud, but silently each wondered if they really wanted to become hunters, and if they had what it took.

The beep of a terminal broke the silence. All eyes turned to its source, with one exception—Yumina stared down at the message on her screen. Then she raised her head and stood up.

"Y-Yumina? Are you seriously going?" Katsuya asked, as rattled as she was resolved.

For a moment, Yumina considered telling him that she would stay behind if he stayed with her. But she rejected that idea: it would be a kind of threat. And even if he changed his mind, twisting his arm like that didn't sit right with her. So instead, she looked him in the eye and grinned. "See you later," she said, exiting the truck.

Katsuya started to reach out to her, then pulled his hand back. He forced himself to remain calm, his expression sober, as he waited for his own turn.

In fact, it didn't take long for him to be called up. About half the candidates who'd been ahead of him had stayed in their seats. Katsuya stood up.

Outside the transport, the man from Druncam beckoned Katsuya to join him near the wall of the ruined factory. Then, with the strength his powered suit gave him, the man hauled a large, thick door to one side. It opened onto a murky interior.

Katsuya steeled himself and stepped inside. There came the loud rasp of straining metal: the man was forcing the door shut again behind him. Then Katsuya was completely sealed in by a gate he could never open on his own.

"Calm down," he told himself. "You'll be fine. Get going."

He brought up the map on his terminal and located both his current position and his destination. Then he raised his weapon and began his slow trek deeper into the ruin.

The factory was eerily quiet. Although it was dim, collapsed ceilings and windows (long reduced to mere holes in the wall) provided enough light to see by. Nevertheless, a faint odor of blood and death pervaded the empty

rooms and hallways. Spent casings littered the ground, and bullet holes riddled the walls and floors. All signs told of a battle—and a recent one, if the still-damp bloodstains were anything to go by. Katsuya concluded one of his predecessors had gotten into a fight, and as he pressed onward, he worried for Yumina, who had gone in first.

A clatter spooked him and he swiveled, weapon ready. To his relief, he saw nothing but a pebble he'd kicked. He frequently checked his map, assuring himself that he wasn't lost as he followed the route it showed him.

Soon, his path led him into ill-lit corridors that were dark, not merely dim. When he came to a place where a large stretch of roof had fallen in, the shafts of outside light stung his gloom-adjusted eyes. Yet the rays that seemed dazzling to him weren't actually all that bright, and after briefly shielding his eyes with his hand, he was soon used to them. The light did, however, cost him his night vision. Once again, the unlit passage ahead looked pitch-dark to Katsuya. He scowled and kept his weapon trained on the darkness as he resumed his cautious advance.

Coming to a bend in the corridor, he cautiously poked his head around the corner. A dead monster lay in the passage ahead. He instinctively pointed his rifle at the creature, but let out a sigh when he realized it was a corpse.

The beast was a drad rat, a large rodent that came up to around Katsuya's knees. The rifle Katsuya had been given could dispatch these creatures with ease, but they still posed enough of a threat that he didn't like his odds of beating one if his ammo ran out. What had the man from Druncam said? Katsuya had all the magazines he would need—as long as he didn't waste them firing wildly or shooting corpses.

"If I panic, I die," he told himself, as if inscribing the lesson in his memory.

Katsuya resumed his journey, checking the route to his destination as he moved through the factory. Although the map on his terminal didn't show his present location, it did alert him when he passed through one of the designated checkpoints on his path. He wondered how it could tell, but only briefly—idle curiosity was a luxury he couldn't afford.

On his way, he discovered several more lifeless drad rats. Maybe Yumina had killed them? If so, she was holding her own, and the thought consoled him even as he worried about her.

A few more dead rats later, Katsuya reached his destination: a large room on the top floor. Everyone who had started before him was there, alive and well.

Yumina spotted him and raced over, delighted that her crush was safe. “You made it. How do you feel?”

“Exhausted,” Katsuya groaned. He was relieved to see her too, but as soon as his tension left him, all the fatigue he’d built up came to the fore. Although he hadn’t fought a single monster, the constant fear of an attack during his trek had taken more out of him than he’d expected.

“I’ll bet.” Yumina cracked a grin. “We’re supposed to stand by here until everyone finishes, so let’s take it easy.” She took Katsuya’s hand and led him into the room, where he leaned against a wall and let out a deep sigh.

They spent their break chatting, swapping stories about their journeys through the factory.

“So, those monsters were already dead when you came through?” Katsuya asked, perplexed.

“Yup. I didn’t fight any monsters either, although I was shaking in my boots the whole way here. Still, it didn’t feel like a letdown. I’m guessing it was the same for you?” Yumina asked with a knowing smile.

“Pretty much,” Katsuya admitted, forcing a grin. “But in that case, who *did* kill those rats?”

“Well...” Yumina’s gaze shifted from the puzzled Katsuya to the syndicate man in the center of the room.

◆

The man from Druncam looked bored. While he had to be in the room in case of emergencies, he wasn’t exactly alert. He knew that Building A, their present location, had already been purged of monsters, and that he was only playing guard to make the place seem dangerous enough to require one. Unless the hopefuls in the room made a fuss, he had nothing much to do, so he let his attention wander.

Then he got a call from one of his colleagues. “Routine check-in. What’s your situation?”

“Nothing to report,” the man responded. “I’ve got time to kill. You?”

“Just finished this batch. Four made it through.”

“And the rest? They all dead?”

“Nah, I think half got away. They’re probably shivering in the bus now.”

“Huh. Not many fatalities, then. Still, I guess that’s not too surprising.”

“Of course not. It wouldn’t be much of a test if it was so hard they couldn’t even run from it.”

“True.”

The man was still in the middle of his conversation when Katsuya and Yumina approached him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Katsuya replied. “Just, er, we didn’t fight any monsters on the way here, and we wondered what that means for our exams. Did we, er, pass, or do we need to take an extra test?”

“Sorry, but those decisions are above my pay grade. There are no extra tests—the only thing you’ve got left to do today is go home. They’ll tell you whether you passed later.”

“I see,” Yumina said, bowing politely. “We understand. Thank you very much, and excuse us for bothering you.”

The man gave her a startled look. Unconsciously, he muttered, “Well, she made it this far, so she should be fine here in Group A.”

“Group A?” Katsuya repeated, suspicious.

A flicker of dismay crossed the man’s face. “Nothing you need to know about. Now, get back over there,” he said, shooing the children away to cover his slip.

Katsuya started back. After another courteous bow, Yumina followed suit. The man watched them go with a strained grin.

“Trouble?” asked the voice on the other end of the call.

“No, nothing much,” the man answered. “I was just thinking that this bunch knows their manners, even if they’re just kids. It almost makes me see the desk jockeys’ point.”

“Lucky stiff. I’ve got all brats over here.”

The man brushed off his colleague’s complaint. “Well, hang in there until we trade off.”

◆

At around the same time the transport carrying Katsuya's group was reaching Building A, a large bus, crudely retrofitted with armor plating, pulled up outside the nearby Building B. Although this second vehicle also carried a group of would-be Druncam hunters, it offered far less safety than Group A's armored troop transport—a sign of how differently the syndicate treated the passengers in each.

Twenty or so people filed out of the bus—girls and boys around Katsuya's age mixed with a sprinkling of slightly older candidates. A greater number remained aboard the vehicle. Stained and dingy clothes marked them all as slum dwellers. This was Group B. Its members had been given the same rifles and magazines for their exam as Katsuya's party. In place of data terminals, however, they received paper maps.

The hopefuls congregated at the entrance to Building B. Its large, sturdy doors were half-open.

"Get in there within five minutes, or you're disqualified," a man from Druncam said, pointing into the building. "If you leave before your exam's over, we'll fail you for running away. Now, begin! Make your own way to the goal."

Building B was as dimly lit as Building A. But unlike its counterpart, faint sounds reminiscent of rodent squeaks emanated from deeper inside. The candidates made no move to enter.

"If you want out, get back on the bus," the man added nonchalantly. "Don't worry. Like I told you before, we'll drop you off back where we found you."

At that, one boy scowled fiercely. He psyched himself up, partly out of desperation, then readied his weapon and set off into the ruined factory. The rest followed him, despite the unease and anxiety on their faces. Once they were all inside, two syndicate men moved to guard the doorway—they didn't want anything to get out that shouldn't.

"You know," one said, "couldn't we just dump 'em in the Kugamayama slums? It'd be a lot less work than bringing 'em all back to where we picked 'em up."

"No," the other replied. "I get where you're coming from, but apparently that'd count as us escorting them to the city."

"If Druncam wants new blood bad enough to recruit slum kids, we could just round some up in Kugamayama. Why bother going to slums in other

cities? It's a pain in the ass."

"In the slums, even kids can fight if you put guns in their hands. The gangs know this, so I bet they'd give us trouble if we snapped up their reserves. Of course, I can only guess what those desk jockeys are worried about."

"It's all such a pain in the ass."

The men went on chatting and grumbling as they kept watch.

◆

Druncam's desk work had originally been the province of ex-hunters who no longer felt up to working in the wastes. As the syndicate grew, however, the job had become too big for these retirees to handle alone, so Druncam had started hiring career office workers with no hunting experience. These formed the core of the faction known within the syndicate as the "desk jockeys," and they were behind the drive to admit more young rookies through tests like this one.

Katsuya, Yumina, and the rest of Group A were those they preferred to recruit: literate children with a degree of education and a relatively firm grasp of common sense and morality, who nevertheless, for whatever reason, aspired to become hunters. They knew not to steal, lie, or kill—things the residents of the walled districts generally didn't appreciate. The ability to read and write also made them easier to train. Members of Group A were thus considered promising if they merely attempted the exam, with no need to prove themselves by fighting monsters; so syndicate personnel had wiped out every beast in Building A before their test had even begun.

In effect, they passed the moment they set foot in the ruined factory. As far as Druncam management was concerned, any candidate who held firm and made it to the goal after syndicate representatives had spent the trip frightening them with the dangers of their new profession had the will to become a hunter. They could take their time developing the necessary skills through training.

Group B, on the other hand, consisted of those the desk jockeys considered undesirables. Yet their plans for the syndicate required a certain number of rookies, and Group A was too small to meet their needs—most children from that social class would never dream of becoming hunters.

Druncam had scraped together Group B to make up the difference. Most of its members were orphans from the slums, and the office workers had serious doubts about their character. In their eyes, these children *would* steal, lie, and kill. And, worst of all, they were illiterate.

So they were given an extremely high bar to clear.

The results of the exam depended on a number of factors. To achieve the same rating as a candidate in Group A, one in Group B would need to demonstrate enough combat ability to compensate for the slum's "flexible" morality and lack of education.

Unlike its counterpart, Building B had not been cleared of monsters. In fact, the syndicate had brought in more from the surrounding area. Its representatives had joked to Group A that death meant disqualification, but for Group B, this was a very real possibility.

◆

Gunfire and screams filled one of the rooms of Building B. A frantic boy fired wildly at massive rats. The rodents shuddered from the impacts as blood gushed out of holes all over their bodies. Disoriented by a heady mixture of elation and fear, the boy poured more bullets into their twitching corpses, splattering his surroundings with fresh gore. Eventually, his burst of gunfire ended—not by choice, but because he'd emptied his magazine.

"I-It stopped shooting," he babbled. "I...I won. I killed it. B-But my gun won't shoot. Am I out of bullets? Am I out?!"

His rifle was useless, and more monsters might be lurking nearby. Terrified, the boy scrambled to swap out his magazine. But in his haste and anxiety, his shaking hands fumbled. He dropped the magazine, then kicked it away in his rush to pick it up. He screamed wildly as he chased the precious ammo he'd sent skidding across the floor.

Three candidates who'd agreed to team up trained their rifles on the rats swarming farther down the corridor. Yet none of them opened fire.

"Hey! Why aren't you shooting?!" one shouted.

"Why aren't *you*?!" retorted another.

Each wanted to conserve his own ammo, and in that fatal delay, the rats scurried up and pounced. Of course, the boys started shooting before the

creatures were right on top of them. But while they scored a fair number of hits, they failed to stop the momentum of the bulky rodents' charge. A bloodied rat corpse barreled into one child, knocking him off his feet. Finding the monster pressed against his face, he fired in blind panic, clipping his nearby teammates. When the gunfire faded, both rats and children were dead.

A girl ran down a hallway, pursued by a pack of rats. In one hand, she clutched a pistol—another candidate had stolen her low-end AAH. To escape her pursuers, she dove into a nearby room that still had a door, which she slammed shut behind her. The rats outside crashed into the door. It shook but did not give.

The girl let out a sigh of relief, but a noise cut her off.

Rodent squeaks.

In the same room.

Gunshots rang out. Then, silence.

"How do you read this, again?" groaned a lone boy named Togami, peering at his map. "'Danger,' maybe? Or 'caution'? But what if I'm wrong?"

The map featured written descriptions of danger zones, places to resupply on ammo, and even safe routes through Building B—a helping hand to the literate.

Togami couldn't read them.

A noise interrupted his fretting. Calmly, he pressed his back to the wall and aimed his rifle at the source of the sound. A rat came into view, so he shot it. Once he felt sure it was dead and there were no more noises nearby, he exhaled and returned to studying his map.

"The goal is...this mark here. That's the only thing I'm sure about—they wouldn't lie about something *that* basic. Okay, gotta keep cool," Togami told himself and hurried on ahead.

In the end, everyone who entered Building B passed or failed as their skills merited.

◆

Katsuya and the rest of his group left the ruined factory and returned to the armored transport. The truck was supposed to set off immediately and return its passengers to their home cities. But just before it started, they received an order to stand by. The syndicate man who'd issued it had been in constant communication with his superiors for some time, frowning all the while. When the conversation finally ended, he turned to the children, his expression suggesting he didn't look forward to his next task.

"Your basic exam is over," he announced, "but we've decided to hold a supplemental test for anyone interested. You'll be fighting monsters called drad rats. If you don't know what those are, you saw some dead ones in that factory."

A stir filled the transport.

"Your score on this test will be added to your base evaluation," the man continued, mentally agreeing with the children's reaction. "There's no penalty if you don't try it. And it won't raise the bar for passing either, so it can't turn a successful grade into a failing one. Don't worry about that, even if you're the only one who sits it out."

Those who'd found the first exam to be nearly too much sighed in relief.

"There's no minimum kill count. If you take out one rat and run away, that'll boost your score. Of course, killing lots of them will raise it even more. It'll probably earn you better treatment after you join Druncam too."

Smiles appeared on the faces of the candidates who craved recognition.

"You won't be on your own this time—everyone interested will go in a group. You're all eligible to participate, even if you sat out the first exam in the truck. Do well enough, and you could still make up for those lost points and pass."

Individuals who had chickened out earlier began to see hope in working with a group.

"That covers it. If you want to take the supplemental exam, raise your hand, and I'll reissue your gear. You have ten minutes to volunteer. As I've told you before, think it over carefully."

Many candidates raised their hands—Katsuya among them.

This supplemental exam had resulted from a rushed compromise between two groups of Druncam executives: those who felt Group A's exam had been too easy, and those loath to fail potential recruits. The deciding factor proved to be the remaining monster population in Building B. The

syndicate had kept some beasts confined in empty rooms and gradually released them to adjust the difficulty of the exercise, but even these had been used up. Group A should have no trouble dealing with any surviving beasts.

At least, that was what the man's superiors had told him. Privately, he had his doubts. If anyone from Group A *did* die during this test, his bosses would start bickering again—even though they'd have no one but themselves to blame for risking the candidates' lives in the first place.

Why should anyone volunteer for danger when they had already passed the test safely? Hunters too blinded by greed to avoid unnecessary risks died young. These kids weren't even hunters yet, and they were already making that mistake.

Yet, despite his misgivings about both Druncam's leadership and Group A, the children had chosen to participate, so he gave them the gear they'd need.

◆

All kitted out again, Katsuya approached the entrance to Building B with the other participants. Yumina tagged along as if nothing could be more natural.

"The monsters here took a big hit, but there are still plenty left deeper in," the man from Druncam breezily warned them as he opened the door. "Unless you've got a death wish, stick to the outer rooms. And, well, good luck."

The most self-assured candidates strode jauntily into the factory. The rest plodded after them, unable to hide their unease.

"Katsuya, don't get carried away and try to go too far in," Yumina cautioned sternly.

"I know," Katsuya responded, cracking a grin at her severity. "You always worry. What's got you so nervous?"

"Everything."

"Oh, come on!"

"Setting out to become hunters already has me worried out of my mind," Yumina declared flatly. "Why wouldn't it?"

Katsuya could see her point, so he didn't press the issue. "All right. I'll

be careful," he said, forcing himself to look serious.

They entered Building B a little behind the others. The area near the entrance generally resembled Building A, apart from one minor detail: a human corpse, partially gnawed by drad rats. The body was horribly mangled, although the pair could still recognize its face: it had been a child their own age. Katsuya and Yumina felt painfully aware that they were in the wasteland, and that people died here.

They were advancing deeper into the building when two drad rats came at them down a hallway, bathed in blood. Yet they charged without faltering —proof the blood was not their own.

Despite their fear, Katsuya and Yumina calmly raised their rifles and took careful aim. The rats were still some distance away, and as the two hunters-to-be had plenty of ammo, they managed to dispatch the rats from a position of relative safety.

The pair exhaled. They had won their first real battle of the day. Katsuya's spirits soared—he could handle this.

But Yumina brought him crashing back to earth. "All right, Katsuya, let's head back."

"Huh? Already?" Katsuya balked. "We've only killed two so far."

"We killed one each. That's plenty for amateurs like us. We'll lose everything if we get greedy and end up dead. Come on, let's go."

"Yeah, but, I mean..." Katsuya dragged his feet.

"You'll have plenty of time to impress people with all the monsters you kill *after* you've had proper training," Yumina pushed, her scolding tone giving way to one of concern. "Please, don't make me worry."

Sensing her genuine care for him, Katsuya smiled and relented, albeit a little reluctantly. "All right."

Yumina's expression softened, and they began retracing their steps.

The girl had felt relieved when Katsuya agreed to return without a fuss. But her peace of mind proved short-lived when the boy abruptly stopped in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Sorry, Yumina," Katsuya said slowly. "I'll catch up with you later!" With that, he sprinted off deeper into the ruined factory.

Yumina was stunned. Her shock gave way to an anxious scowl, and she

gave chase, shouting, “Not *again*!”

◆

In a room of Building B, a girl named Airi was at death’s door. Her injuries, though light by hunter standards, were severe by anyone else’s. She was bleeding profusely—even the wounds she’d tried to staunch dripped crimson stains onto the floor. The remains of several drad rats she had killed lay in the room with her. The corpses testified to her skill—but also to her limits.

As she sat on the floor, leaning against a wall, she struggled just to stay conscious. Getting up and persevering to the goal was beyond her. Airi had failed Group B’s exam; now, she needed to focus on survival. If someone from Druncam searched the building to retrieve the syndicate’s gear and found her, she speculated, she might still make it out alive. So she stayed put, trying to conserve her blood and her stamina.

Yet the cold, rational part of her mind told her she was done for. She didn’t have much time left, and she couldn’t be sure anyone was even coming for the gear. Above all, she doubted that a retrieval team would bother to save her, even if it found her. Airi knew that all Druncam wanted from Group B was the strength to survive the wasteland. They weren’t likely to rescue someone who had failed their deadly test by going over the time limit.

You’re going to die, her rational mind insisted. *Help me!* her emotional self screamed silently. As time wore on, her pleas came to resemble dying shrieks.

Then the door opened, and someone stepped inside. With the last of her strength, Airi pointed her handgun at the boy and grunted, “Stay back.”

The girl was manifestly hostile.

She already saw her fellow candidates as enemies—they were more to blame for her predicament than the monsters were. All the children knew corpses could be a source of ammo, and some had gotten the idea to try taking resources from the living too. Not all had survived the attempt, but those who’d succeeded had nearly killed her when stealing her gear.

Airi had narrowly survived the robbery, albeit injured and minus her rifle. All she had left was a pistol she’d smuggled into the testing site.

Naturally, it didn't pack much of a punch, so her subsequent encounter with the rats had proved a desperate struggle.

And now, she had another cause for concern: a new and fatal weakness in the weapon. To deflect Katsuya's attention from it, Airi glowered at him with all the malice she could muster.

◆

For a long time, Katsuya had felt, on rare occasions, that someone was calling him. When he followed that sensation, it usually led him to someone dead or dying. Even as a child, he could help save them by calling for aid. When he was able to find someone in time and they survived, their gratitude made an impression on him, and as he grew, this shaped his personality. Often, however, he was too late, and some people mistakenly assumed he was searching for dead bodies. So, Katsuya had stopped telling others when he sensed the call.

He'd felt it again today, that awareness guiding him through the ruined factory. And when the person he found pointed her pistol at him, his first reaction was still relief that he'd made it in time.

"Stay back," Airi said.

"Don't worry. I won't hurt you," Katsuya reassured her, halting and raising his hands slightly. Then he tried approaching her again.

But Airi glared even more fiercely. "I said stay back."

Katsuya grimaced. "Calm down. I'm not your enemy," he said. "Those injuries will kill you if you don't get treatment soon. At least let me give you first aid."

Airi knew he was right. She was hurt so badly that simply holding up her pistol was becoming a challenge. It swayed in her increasingly unsteady grip.

"I'm not bluffing," she muttered, hoping that her glare would make up for her shaky aim.

"But you'll die without help. You've got to know that."

"At this range...I won't miss."

"Come on. Put the gun down." Katsuya did his best to pacify Airi, but her expression didn't soften one bit. After a brief standoff, he soberly took another step forward.

“I warned you!” Airi hurled all the animosity in her nature at Katsuya, yet he kept coming toward her.

Then she pulled the trigger.

“Don’t make a fuss; I’m gonna patch you up,” Katsuya said, sighing, when he reached Airi’s side. “This might hurt, but put up with it.”

He took out a portable first aid kit—not Druncam gear, but one of his personal belongings. Although the syndicate hadn’t told him what his exam would consist of, he’d anticipated that medical supplies would be useful in any test of hunting skill. He began treating Airi without waiting for a response, rolling up her clothes where bloodstains told him to expect a wound and plastering medical tape over her injuries.

“This is a recovery capsule. You might have a tough time swallowing it without water, but try anyway,” he said, half-forcing the pill into Airi’s mouth.

She choked it down obediently. She hadn’t resisted when he’d lifted her clothes either, and the arm gripping her pistol hung limply at her side. Airi was confused. She wanted to know why he was treating her. But another question burned even more fiercely in her mind: “How did you know I was out of ammo?”

Airi had already fired every bullet in her pistol. She had been threatening Katsuya with an empty gun.

“I figured I could walk off one shot,” he answered casually, not stopping her treatment. “I mean, I’ve got medicine, and it’s only a handgun.”

Airi’s face contorted in astonishment. Katsuya hadn’t seen through her bluff—he’d been willing to take a bullet to help her.

It defied her comprehension.

“Why?” she demanded.

Despite her terse speech, Katsuya guessed what she wanted to know. “It isn’t easy watching someone you tried to save die on you,” he answered, with a relieved grin. “But I wasn’t too late this time. So, please, just let me help you.” He seemed a little bashful as he continued tending to her wounds.

Tears welled in Airi’s eyes. No one in her life until now had ever been willing to take a bullet for her.

Katsuya stabilized Airi's condition, but she would still die if she stayed where she was, and she was still too weak to walk. So Katsuya opted to carry her out on his back. He was in fairly good shape, but the weight of another person naturally slowed him down. Not that he could afford to move quickly, anyway—that might reopen her wounds.

On its own, that would have been enough to explain Katsuya's scowl. But he had other concerns—monster attacks had become strangely more frequent since he'd joined up with Airi. The beasts seemed almost drawn to the two of them. Katsuya figured he must have gone too deep into the factory and worried whether he could make it out encumbered. The girl on his back seemed to reflect his anxiety.

"Don't worry," he said, forcing a jovial smile. "I've got plenty of ammo to spare."

"'Kay," Airi murmured, evidently reassured.

Katsuya kept calm, buoyed by her trust. Yet he felt far from sanguine. While he did have plenty of ammo, it wouldn't last forever. And since he had followed his instincts in his rush to find Airi, he didn't clearly remember the way back. Nevertheless, he made progress, despite repeated rat attacks. With Airi's weight slowing all his movements, he found himself at a disadvantage against the creatures.

Airi realized that she was a burden. Unless something changed, she would not only die but also take Katsuya down with her. The burden of getting her savior killed seemed even worse to her than her own death. She felt shocked to discover such feelings in herself, but also a little glad.

"This is far enough," she said. "Leave me."

"Are you nuts?" Katsuya responded.

"We'll both die if we keep this up."

"No," Katsuya said flatly.

"I can hold out for a while now that you've patched me up. If you leave me in a room with a door and go to call help, we can both make it out alive." Airi explained that drad rats couldn't open doors, so once a room was clear, she wouldn't have to worry about reinforcements. That was why she had survived this long.

But Katsuya realized she was only offering him an excuse to leave her to her fate. Again, he answered with a clipped "No."

"Why?" she demanded weakly.

“’Cause I just don’t want to. I made up my mind to save you, and I’ll do it my way. If you don’t like that, tough.” Katsuya grinned without a hint of shame.

Again, tears flowed from Airi’s eyes. She wept for joy at his kind words—and for regret, because she was dragging him down with her.

As they pressed on, their situation only got worse. Their ammo reserves and stamina dwindled, while they encountered threats with ever-increasing frequency. Katsuya faced the harsh conditions grimly.

Then, in his next battle with a rat, all his overexertion finally caught up with him. As soon as he spotted the enemy, he instinctively swung his rifle toward it—and lost his balance. Airi’s weight worsened his stumble. By the time he realized how vulnerable he was, the monster was almost on top of them. He brought his weapon around, but there was no longer room to aim.

A moment later, the huge rodent went down in a hail of bullets. Carried by the momentum of its charge, the beast slid across the floor as it died, leaving a crimson streak in its wake. As Katsuya and Airi struggled to grasp what had happened, a voice cried, “Katsuya! There you are!”

Yumina had killed the rat. She lowered her rifle, then ran straight up to them and shouted, “What were you thinking, coming this far in?!”

“Y-Yumina, what are you doing here?” Katsuya asked. “Didn’t you leave already? I know I said I’d catch up with you—”

“Shut up!” she snapped, cutting off any retort he could have made. As she prepared to chew him out some more, she noticed Airi. Once she’d gotten the gist of their situation, she let out a deep sigh. “We’ll talk later. Let’s get to a safe place first. I’ll lead the way.” She checked the map on her terminal and set off, motioning the others to follow her.

But Katsuya hesitated, confused. “Yumina, that way leads deeper inside. Are you sure you’re not turned around?”

“We’re closer to the goal than the entrance.”

“But there’ll be way more monsters.”

“Not if we stick to the safe routes. Stop arguing and come on.”

Yumina led them through the ruin, using her terminal to navigate. The “safe route” really was safer. Although they ran into a few monsters, they were always in position to slaughter the beasts from a safe distance.

“Yumina, how do you know where to go?” he wondered, surprised.

“Our terminals have maps with the routes drawn on them, remember?” she replied.

“Huh? But those are for the other building.”

“You can switch between them. Didn’t you notice? What did you think they gave us terminals again for?” Yumina sighed deeply.

Katsuya forced a smile to save face, then let out an exhausted breath of his own. The three of them reached Building B’s goal point without any further trouble.

◆

The syndicate man was waiting in the large room that served as Building B’s finish line. He immediately recognized Katsuya and Yumina as members of Group A, but could hardly believe they’d passed a test meant for Group B.

The boy called Togami gave the new arrivals a disgruntled look. After a moment’s thought, he called out to the man from Druncam. “Hey! I heard we’re ‘Group B’ and there’s another bunch of candidates out there. Is that them?”

“How do you know that?” the man demanded.

“One of your buddies was chatting about it.”

The man sighed at his colleague’s loose lips. “Why do you care?”

“Well, I heard they got a chance to score extra points, and I was wondering if we’d get anything like that too.”

“Oh, is that all?” The man considered. “If you want a bonus, go retrieve the gear left in this building. If you bring back a lot, I’ll put in a good word for you with the higher-ups.”

“Sure thing.” Togami nodded and left the room.

“Guess he couldn’t stand getting looked down on compared to the softies in Group A.” The man chuckled to himself. “I like his pluck—assuming he lives.”

Refusing to settle for one’s current lot in life, striving to make it better—that was the mark of a highly successful hunter. And a common trait in those who died young.

Togami’s mission to round up the gear scattered throughout Building B

was proceeding without a hitch. A look of surprise crossed the boy's face when he came upon a body more heavily armed than the rest.

"This guy's got *five* rifles, and he still bit the dust? Talk about hopeless." He laughed softly, then set about stuffing the weapons into his backpack. Airi's rifle was among them.

Guns were useless without people to fire them. Here lay someone who, lacking both the strength to survive on his own and the skill to make allies, had met the fate he earned.

◆

With the exam behind them, Katsuya and Yumina got back into the armored transport and returned to the place they'd first boarded it. Then, for no particular reason, they stood and watched it drive off until it vanished from sight. Only their fatigue and the stains on their clothes remained to prove they'd been in the wasteland. Both children had come home alive and unscathed.

Katsuya felt a faint sense of accomplishment.

Yumina let out a long breath, then turned to him with a confident smile. "I'm glad we both made it. Good work out there."

"So am I," Katsuya responded. "You were great too, Yumina."

"*Now* it's time to talk. I've got so much to say to you. So, *so* much. So much you wouldn't believe. And you're going to listen to all of it." She had told him they would talk once they reached a safe place, but she had held her peace in the goal room of Building B, so as not to vent her grievances around Airi.

The other girl had joined them on the armored transport for the return journey. As a general rule, anyone who reached the goal in Building B passed the exam, so the syndicate had offered her a ride to Kugamayama, where she would move into a Druncam facility. Airi had taken the deal, as had the majority of the other successful candidates from Group B. Most came from slums in other cities and never wanted to go back if they could help it. Some had even taken the exam to escape local conflicts.

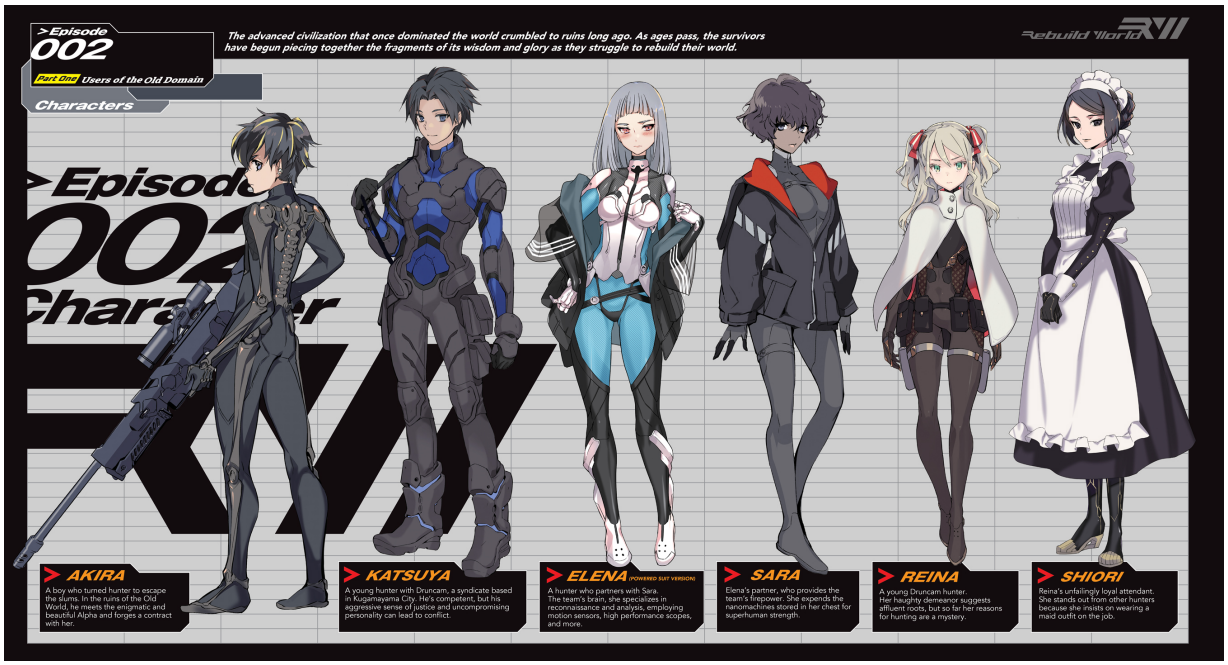
Airi had really warmed up to Katsuya, and she'd spent the truck ride sitting next to him. Yumina hadn't been able to bring herself to chew Katsuya out right next to the girl he'd saved. Now that they had parted

ways, however, Yumina was free to cut loose.

"C-Can't it wait till we get home?" Katsuya ventured, flinching at her intensity. "And we're both exhausted. How about a nice, long, relaxing bath first?"

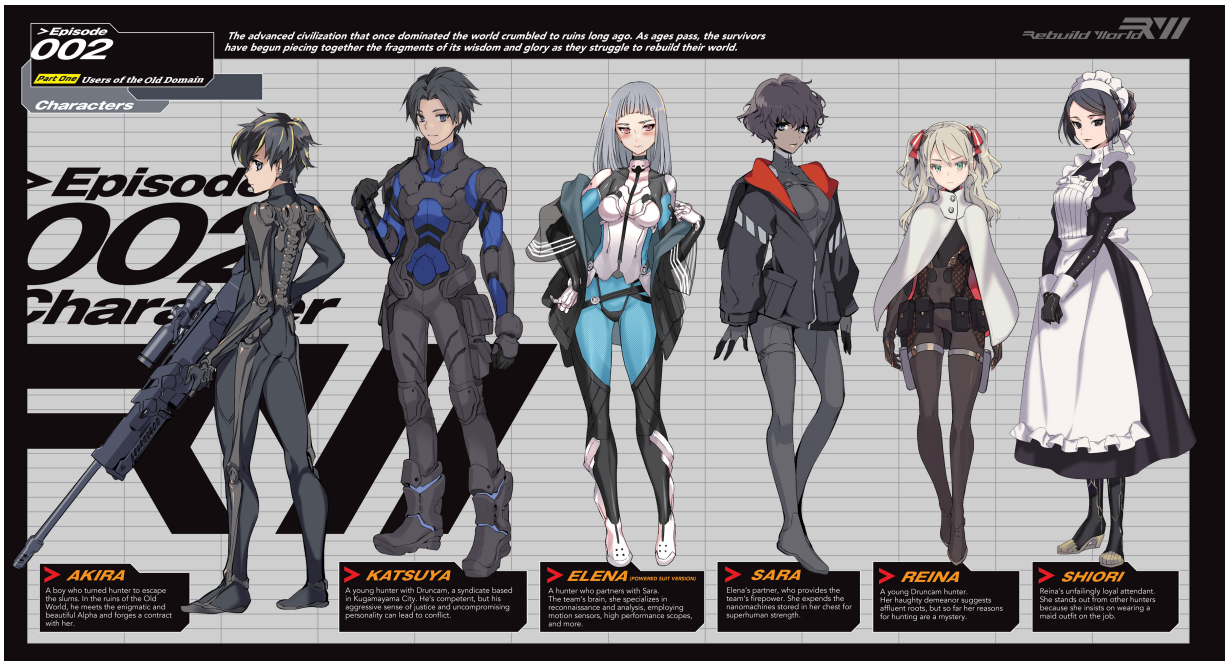
"Good idea." Yumina smiled brightly. "We *should* go home first. Come on. What are you dragging your feet for?" She seized Katsuya's hand and squeezed as if to say she would never let go. Then she hauled the flustered boy back to their home. All the while, she kept a tight grip on his hand, wishing that they would always be together.

One year later, a massive horde of monsters swarmed out of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins and assaulted Kugamayama City.


>Episode
002
Part One Users of the Old Domain
Characters
The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.
Rebuild World RVII
>Episode
002
Chara r
AKIRA
A boy who turned hunter to escape the slums. In the ruins of the Old World, he meets the enigmatic and beautiful Alpha and forges a contract with her.
KATSUYA
A young hunter with Druncam, a syndicate based in Kugamayama City. He's competent, but his aggressive sense of justice and uncompromising personality can lead to conflict.
ELENA (POWERED SUIT VERSION)
A hunter who partners with Sara. The team's brain, she specializes in reconnaissance and analysis, employing motion sensors, high performance scopes, and more.
SARA
Elena's partner, who provides the team's firepower. She expends the nanomachines stored in her chest for superhuman strength.
REINA
A young Druncam hunter. Her haughty demeanor suggests affluent roots, but so far her reasons for hunting are a mystery.
SHIORI
Reina's unfailingly loyal attendant. She stands out from other hunters because she insists on wearing a maid outfit on the job.

Damn it! I want strength like he has! And I don't care who or what it takes to get it! Katsuya made a wish. He wished with all the focus his extraordinary talent granted him—an absolute clarity that purged other thoughts from his mind and bleached the color from his world. In that white realm, a girl was smiling.
Rebuild World RVII

Author: Nahuse
Illustrator: Gin
Environmental Artist: ytsh
Mechanical Designer: cell
Rebuild World II
Part One
Users of the Old Domain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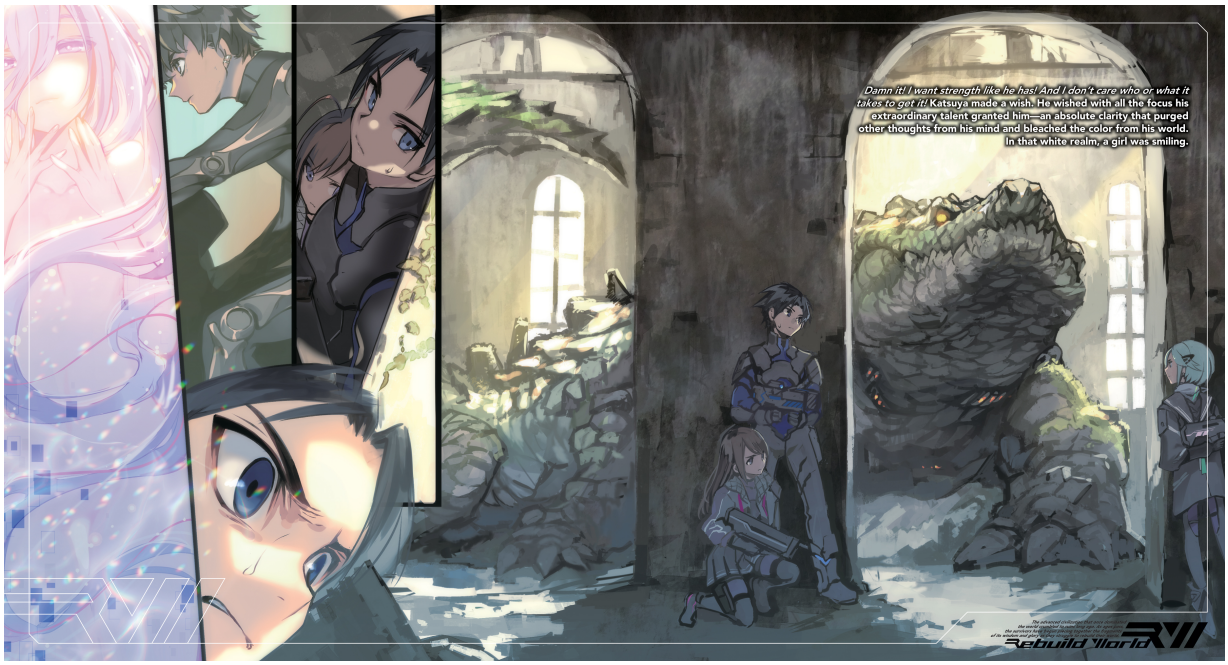
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In that white realm, a girl was smiling.
Rebuild World RW

>Episode 002

Part One Users of the Old Domain

Character Status

This exceptionally talented young hunter works with Druncam, a syndicate based in Kugamayama City. His staunch sense of justice and hatred of all things crooked leads him to constantly butt heads with the adults in his life, while his habit of sticking his nose into trouble frequently annoys his teammate Yumina.
He met Akira while out on patrol, and although the other boy's marksmanship impressed him, he instinctively perceived that it wasn't Akira's own skill. He has felt a complex mix of envy and rivalry toward Akira ever since.
His current hunter rank is twenty-six. Druncam provides all his equipment, which is higher-spec than a new hunter could afford.

NAME
Katsuya

SEX
Male

HOMETOWN
Nanogamiya City, the East

JOB
Hunter

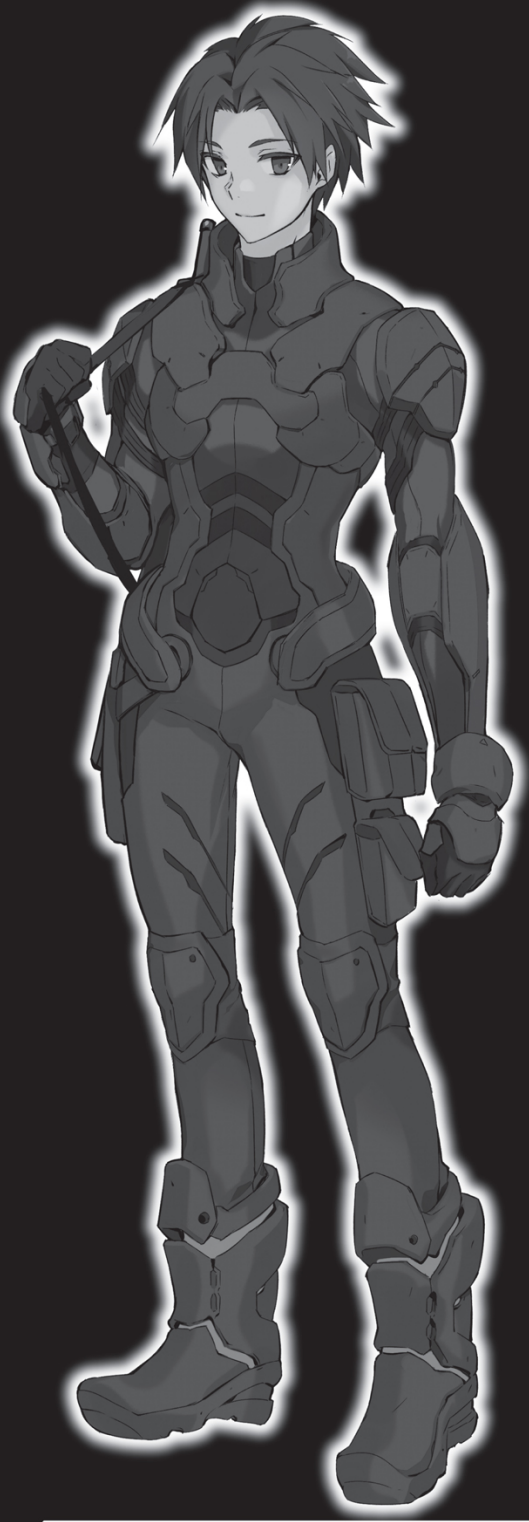
HUNTER RANK
Rank 26

EQUIPMENT

WEAPON
A3LL assault rifle

ARMOR
Eclipse, a TXTE powered suit

GEAR
Standard data terminal



KATSUYA

Monster Guide

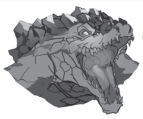
YARATA SCORPION

These hard-shelled, scorpion-like creatures are roughly waist-high to a human. Most bullets deflect off their tough exoskeletons. They can play dead or cover themselves with steel beams and other debris as camouflage, confusing hunters.

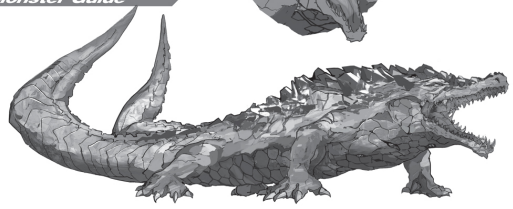
YARATA SCORPION

>Episode
002
Part One Users of the Old Domain

Monster Guide



Head
(front view)

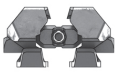


GLUTTONOUS CROCODILE

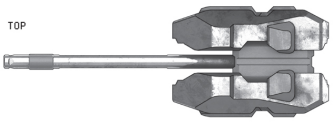
These reptilian beasts possess forked tails, strong teeth, and powerful jaws. True to their name, gluttonous crocodiles will eat anything, and their bodies rapidly take on the properties of their meals. For example, a croc that eats metal will grow metal scales.

As a result, individual crocs vary wildly according to their habitats. Most are small—roughly one meter from end to end—but in the right environment, they have been known to exceed hundreds of meters in length.

Cannon Unit



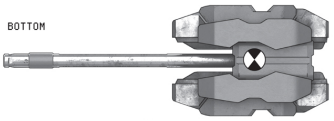
FRONT



TOP

BACK

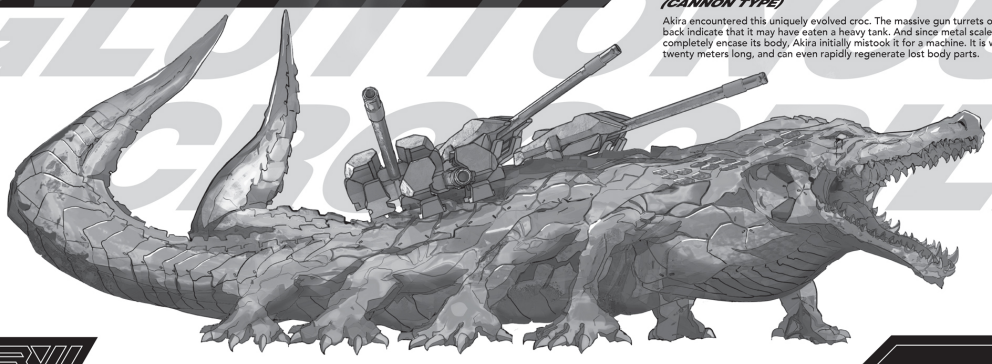
SIDE

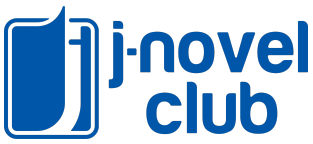


BOTTOM

GLUTTONOUS CROCODILE
(CANNON TYPE)

Akira encountered this uniquely evolved croc. The massive gun turrets on its back indicate that it may have eaten a heavy tank. And since metal scales almost completely encase its body, Akira initially mistook it for a machine. It is well over twenty meters long, and can even rapidly regenerate lost body parts.





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REBUILD WORLD Vol. II Part 1: Users of the Old Domain
by Nahuse

Translated by William Varteresian
Edited by NegativePrimes

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